Accounting Study Guide

Accounting by Claribel Alegría

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Claribel Alegría's poem "Accounting" was first published in English by Curbstone Press in 1993 as part of a collection of poems in her book, *Fugues*. Although only twenty-six lines in length, the poem is saturated with a collection of autobiographical images as diverse as her happiness as a child, playing in puddles of water, and her grief at her mother's death. Alegría refers to the vignettes in her poem as "electrical instants." These snapshots of her life are only brief moments, but they tell the poet's own story. The title, "Accounting," can refer to the systematic presentation of the data that comprises her life. That is what accountants do. They examine financial data, list and interpret it, and balance the account. This is what Alegría has done with this poem. Her poem is an elegy that provides an accounting of her memories over a large span of years. The events and people mentioned in the poem are representative of several of the locations in which she has lived, and thus her memories become the source material for the poem. When Alegría wrote "Accounting," she had been writing poetry for sixty-two years. This poem appears in one of her latest collections of poetry, and so its publication also serves as a reflection of her creative life.

Author Biography

Claribel Alegría was born May 12, 1924 in Esteli, Nicaragua. When Alegría was nine months old, the family fled the occupation of Nicaragua for El Salvador. Alegría grew up in Santa Ana, El Salvador, and attended a progressive school, Jose Ingenieros, which was named after the Argentinean philosopher. From the time she was nine months old until she was eighteen, Alegría and her family lived as exiles from their native Nicaragua.

When Alegría was only six years old, she began to create her own poems. Her mother carefully wrote down the poems that Alegría dictated. Then, when she was fourteen, Alegría read Rainer Maria Rilke's, *Letters to a Young Poet*. Rilke's letters, written in 1903, had a profound effect on Alegría's young life. In virtually every interview ever given, she has recounted how, upon reading Rilke's letters, she suddenly knew that she wanted to be a poet. By the time she was sixteen, Alegría was writing poetry with all the seriousness of an established poet, even though she was still unpublished. Finally, in 1941, when she was seventeen years old, she published her first poems in *Repertorio Americano*, a Central American newspaper's cultural supplement. Then, two years later, Alegría was admitted to a girls' finishing school in Hammond, Louisiana.

In 1944, Alegría moved to Washington, DC, and enrolled at Georgetown University. She found a job as a translator at the Pan-American Union, studied for her classes at night, and three afternoons a week, studied with the poet, Juan Ramon Jiménez. As part of her study, Alegría was forced to concentrate on learning formal poetic forms. She also worked on becoming a more disciplined poet. After three years of studying with Jiménez, he chose twenty-two of her poems, and they became her first published book of poetry, *Ring of Silence*, which was published in 1948. Also in 1948, Alegría graduated from George Washington University with a bachelor's degree in philosophy and letters.

In December 1947, she had married Darwin J. Flakoll, a student at Georgetown University, who was completing a graduate degree. In time, Alegría and Flakoll had four children: Maya, Patricia, Karen, and Erik. During the next thirty years, Alegría and her family moved many times, but even through all the moves, she continued to write poems and short stories. Some of the works that she published during these years include several poetry collections, such as *Vigils* (1953), *Aquarius* (1955), and *Guest of my Time* (1961). Alegría also wrote novels, but even with a creative change to writing novels, Alegría never abandoned her poetry. A 1978 book of poems, *I Survive*, won the Casa de las Americas Prize in 1978.

Alegría was finally able to return to Nicaragua to live in 1979, when the Sandinista rebels gained power. After the move, Alegría and her husband wrote a history of the revolution titled *Nicaragua: The Sandinista Revolution; A Political Chronicle 1855—1979* (1982). A pivotal event in Alegría's life occurred in 1980 when Archbishop Romero was assassinated in El Salvador. Alegría spoke out against this assassination and the death squads in El Salvador. As a result, she was forbidden to return to El Salvador to visit her parents. Alegría continued to write poetry and in 1993 published *Fugues*, from which the

poem "Accounting" is taken. Her husband's death in April 1995 was depicted by Alegría in *Sorrow* (1999). *Casting Off*, a collection of poems, was published in 2003. Alegría lives in Managua, Nicaragua.

Plot Summary

Overview

Alegría's poem "Accounting" is an accounting of the important events of her life. The first few lines tell the reader that the poem's author remembers certain events in her life that she defines as "electrical instants." What follows are vignettes from the author's memory, beginning with her childhood recollections. Alegría's memories make the leap from skipping puddles to losing her virginity in only a few lines. She also recalls painful memories□the death of her mother, the assassination of Archbishop Romero, and the occupation of Nicaragua. Coupled with memories of loss are memories of love. Alegría compresses a lifetime of events into the few moments that a reader takes to study the poem. She dissolves the barrier of time and reduces her existence into twenty-six lines.

It is sometimes a mistake to assume the author and the poem's narrator are one person, but in this case, there are several clues that indicate that Alegría is offering autobiographical details from her own life in this poem. The speaker of the poem tells the reader that she is sixty-eight years old, and Alegría would have been sixty-eight when the poem was written. Because Alegría relied upon her husband, Darwin Flakoll, to translate her books from Spanish into English, the publication date would be at least a year after the poem's composition, and so the reader can assume that "Accounting" was written in 1992, although not published until 1993. There are other confirmed autobiographical details present in the poem, as well. Alegría had been prohibited from returning to El Salvador after she spoke out publicly and condemned the assassination of Archbishop Romero. She was not permitted to re-enter the country even to visit her dying mother, and thus, Alegría would have been forced to wait for news of her mother's death by telephone. Alegría was also a vocal critic of the military occupation of Nicaragua. All of these details suggest that Alegría and the poet narrator are the same person. Knowing this information makes appreciating and understanding the poem as an autobiographical accounting easier for the reader.

Lines 1—3

The opening lines of "Accounting" offer the background information needed to understand the poem. These three lines also explain the narrative that follows. Alegría tells the reader that she is sixty-eight years old. As people age, they often reminisce about the life they have led. Alegría is engaging in this process of reflection. At the same time, the title makes clear that the poem is an accounting of her life. She will chronicle her life and list "a few electrical instants." "Electrical" suggests these are moments of power, perhaps moments that shocked her. They are also moments that left a mark upon her psyche. The use of "instants" makes clear that the memories are just moments of time, vignettes of events that when recalled pass through her mind in an instant.

Lines 4—8

The first of Alegría's memories is the happiness she felt skipping through puddles. Presumably, this first memory is of her childhood, when playing in puddles after a fresh rainfall brings the sort of carefree enjoyment that the poet describes as "happiness." Alegría quickly jumps to another memory, this time a visit to the Inca ruins at Macchu Pichu in the mountains of Peru. It would be possible to consider that a childhood trip, perhaps a vacation taken with parents, created wonderful memories that are recalled many years later. However, there is no evidence that this poem's accounting is chronological. Alegría's husband was with the United States foreign service for many years and the family moved frequently, visiting many different countries. The family lived in Chile for a period of time. While there is no record that they lived in Peru, they did live in Central America, and so the visit that the author recalls might have occurred during her marriage, rather than during childhood. The ruins of Macchu Pichu are breathtaking, and regardless of whether Alegría visited as an adolescent or as an adult, the visit would have been unforgettable. Her six hours at the site indicates a day trip, though, and that she did not spend the night there. Whether taking the train and bus or walking the Inca Trail, the trip is a long one, and with transportation, a visitor has only five or six hours to actually spend at the ruins if trying to do the trip in one day. Visitors who spend the night near the site can enter at dawn and spend all day.

Lines 7 and 8 recall the memory of the author's loss of virginity. No age is given, but the small amount of time, only ten minutes, suggests that perhaps she was young. The quick fumbling of youth might be brief, but Alegría counts it as one of the moments that left a mark upon her. It is the awakening of sexuality, and it marks the end of childhood and the transition to being an adult. Such an event is "electrical," since sexuality also brings greater responsibilities and, eventually, children who will change her life forever.

Lines 9—13

In lines 9 and 10, Alegría jumps ahead to the death of her mother. The buzzing of the telephone has special significance for Alegría, since it has been the instrument of bad news on several occasions. Because the government has forbidden her to reenter Nicaragua, the author must await the phone call that will tell her of her mother's death. She wanted to be with her mother, who had asked for her daughter, but Alegría's brothers telephoned and told her not to come since they feared she would be arrested and murdered. The telephone also brought her news of the death of Monsignor Romero. The voice is hoarse, grief-stricken at the assassination of this brave man. When Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero was assassinated on March 24, 1980, Alegría was in Paris, preparing to give a poetry reading at the Sorbonne. She abandoned her reading and instead spoke about the murder of the prelate. Romero had spoken out against the El Salvadorian death squads that functioned with government acquiescence. Alegría admired Romero and was distraught at his death. She lists this event immediately after the death of her mother, and like her mother's death, it is an event that marked her permanently. Romero's death was also the beginning of Alegría's

protest writing, and so it is crucial in defining her as a writer. One other aspect of Archbishop Romero's death proved to be very crucial to Alegría's life. When she spoke at the Sorbonne, Alegría's tribute to the slain churchman and her condemnation of the death squads angered the El Salvadorian government. The result was a twelve-year self-imposed exile. If she returned, she would be arrested. As mentioned previously, Alegría did not even dare return for her mother's funeral in 1982.

Lines 14—17

Line 14 remains a mystery. Since Alegría has not published her memoirs, not all events in her life are known. Since she and her husband traveled extensively, they may have visited Delft, Holland, at some period. They may even have lived there briefly, but the brevity of the period mentioned indicates that it is an event in Delft, perhaps something intensely personal that warrants mention. Such a brief time, "fifteen minutes in Delft," does suggest an event important enough to be one of the "few electrical instants" in the poet's life. Of line 15, Alegría gave birth to three daughters, but it seems most likely that in this line she is reflecting on the birth of the first. She says, "my daughter," and thus signifies only one, likely the first. Readers will note the use of "my" and ponder its meaning, but mothers often feel a special connection to a daughter that is revealed in the possessive use of "my" rather than "our."

The next two lines signal an abrupt change of thought. Lines 16 and 17 capture Alegría's commitment to Nicaragua's liberation. Nicaragua was the country of her birth, and although she was only an infant when her family was forced to flee, she had always felt a deep connection to the country. Her father worked to support rebellions in their homeland, and Alegría grew up knowing that all Nicaraguans bore a special responsibility to oppose the oppression in that country. She was associated with the Sandinista National Liberation Front, the guerilla movement that took control of the Nicaraguan government in 1979. After the rebels gained control, Alegría and her family were finally able to move back to Nicaragua. The move was the culmination of many years of hard work, and as she notes in line 17, "dreaming."

Lines 18—21

These four lines offer an opposition in images. Alegría wrote poetry that exposed the injustice of government, the inequities of economy, and the inequitable results of a patriarchal system that repressed one half of the population. The "immortal deaths" of line 18 are the deaths that endure forever. They are not forgotten, nor are "the eyes of that starving child." The poet cannot forget the injustice of the world. This poem lists a "few electrical instants," but it also lists the events that marked the poet and that cannot be erased. She has seen political oppression's effects on the individual, thus an oppressive state is no longer a vague entity but a child starving to death.

In contrast to starvation and death, Alegría moves now to the opposite image, that of love. After his death in 1995, Alegría wrote another book of poetry, *Sorrow*, a book filled

with a longing for what had been lost that defies description. These poems are filled with immense pain and grief. Alegría's husband is clearly the "your" in line 20. It is his eyes that bathe her in love. Line 21 is a continuation of the previous line and the two lines should be read as one sentence: the poet remembers "your eyes bathing me with love / one forget-me-not afternoon." There were many moments of love in a marriage that lasted nearly forty-eight years, but some moments are always more intense, more memorable. Readers cannot know what "electrical instant" the poet cites, but its importance to the writer is made very clear by its inclusion in this poem.

Lines 22—26

The last four lines of the poem recall that Alegría is also the poet. This poem is the autobiographical musing of a poet, a craftsman of words. Lines 23 and 24 tell the reader of the poet's urge to make her life a poem. The reader also learns that the poet is writing in the heat of the day, in the afternoon. But we also learn more about this period of composition, since the poet refers to this time as "sultry," a romantic connotation rather than the description of oppressively hot or sweltering temperatures that the word suggests. The writing of Alegría's life is, therefore, linked to a more intimate atmosphere. It is more personal than just composing a list of events. The composition of this poem was an "urge," a force that impelled her to compress her life into these few lines, perhaps a need to escape the heat and mould herself into her poem. She used the British spelling of mold, to "mould" these events. Her use of the British spelling may reflect only that her international background centers her language. On the other hand, this spelling of mould is most often associated with death and the return to earth. Perhaps as Alegría nears seventy years of age, she also begins to reflect on death. Certainly there have been several references to death in this poem, and in this case, the poet may "mould" herself into the poem, as the dead moulder into earth. The poet becomes the poem and is thus preserved for eternity.

The final two lines continue this evolution into the void. Initially, the voice is "a shout." The poet's words can be heard clearly, but the words have been compressed into just one sound. Just as she had compressed her life, she now compresses her poem. But even that shout is transitory. Soon all that remains of the poet is "a fleck of foam," as she dissolves into nothingness. The end of the poem is cyclical. Alegría began this confessional by noting her age, and she ends it by disappearing into the void. The poem now contains her life, it reveals her story, and finally, the poet has been dissolved into the language of poetry.

Themes

Change

Alegría's poem, "Accounting," assembles the major events in the poet's life. Because these events occur over a wide space of time, they reflect the author at different periods of her life. The young girl who skipped puddles is also the same woman who later grieved at the death of loved ones and who worked so resolutely for her country's freedom. The poet has not only grown older, she has changed from a child to a woman, from lighthearted play to social activism. In the final lines of the poem, the poet prepares for one last change□her own death. At that hour, she will not cease to be. Like many poets before her, she has seen that she will live on in her work. More than her memories are preserved; she is preserved within the poem's lines. When she moulds herself into these lines, she follows in the footsteps of poets as great as William Shakespeare, who also recognized in his Sonnet 55 ("Not marble nor the gilded monuments") that he would live forever in verse.

Endurance

Alegría's poem is a testament to her ability to endure and to the power that it takes for anyone to endure tragedy. She was born into a country of conflict. As an infant, Alegría's father opposed the United States marine occupation of Nicaragua. The family was harassed and even fired upon by armed soldiers. Even though Alegría was only an infant when the family finally fled Nicaragua, she grew up understanding that she was a refugee and an exile from the country of her birth. In lines 16 and 17, the poet poignantly recalls the wait for her country's liberation to become a reality: "I don't know how many years / dreaming of my people's liberation." The use of "dreaming" signifies the depth of yearning as she endured this long wait. She waited fifty-five years.

Identity

Few people think at great depth about the elements that make up their identity. And yet, we are all the composite identity of the important events of our lives. Alegría acknowledges this fact in her poem, "Accounting." In the opening lines of the poem she reveals her age and that she will list the defining moments of her life, the "few electrical instants" that marked her. These moments that marked her forever are the moments that created the adult who emerged from that moment of happiness in which the child skipped puddles. Alegría's identity is an accumulated self-awareness that she is the result of a multifaceted life lived in many places, whether Delft or Macchu Pichu. She is the result of the events that occurred in her life, whether the birth of a child or the death of a parent. All events that occurred in Alegría's life are considered collectively and become essential components of her self-identity. Alegría's poem reveals her identity to her readers in an intensely personal manner.

Human Rights

Lines 12 and 13, as well as lines 17, 18, and 19 of "Accounting" reveal what a huge part of Alegría's life has been devoted to human rights issues. In a poem of 26 lines, almost one fifth of the lines that comprise the poet's life are centered on her concern for the peoples' right to exist freely, to protest injustice, to offer aid to those most in need. The description in line 11 of "the hoarse voice" that telephoned Alegría to announce the death of Archbishop Romero reveals both the anguish that the caller felt at having to make this call, and the poet's commitment to the ideals for which the archbishop worked. Alegría was in Paris when she was called. The effort to locate her at this place suggests that her work was important within the context of Archbishop Romero's human rights work. The remaining three lines in the poem, which deal with human rights issues, are equally convincing of Alegría's resolution to improve her country. She has dreamed "of my people's liberation" and is equally aware of the "immortal deaths" and the "starving child" who need an advocate. Alegría is as marked by her commitment to human rights as she is by any other event of her lifetime.

Memory

Memory is the foundation of Alegría's poem, "Accounting." The poem is a list of the poet's most important memories, drawn from a lifetime of memories. Each human being forms new memories almost constantly, but only certain memories are retained and recalled as significant. The reader knows that the memories recalled for this poem are important because the poet has written in line three that these are the "few electrical instants" of a lifetime of memories. Memory can be a powerful tool of growth and change, and Alegría's list of memories reveals how she has grown from child to woman, from happiness to grief, and finally, to love.

Wisdom

Alegría never mentions knowledge or the growth of wisdom in her poem, and yet this theme is implicit in any discussion of this poem. The poet tells readers that "In the sixty-eight years / I have lived / there are a few electrical instants" worth recalling. The poet is reflecting on a lifetime of events, places, and people. The title of the poem, "Accounting," suggests something about this process of having reached a position of wisdom in the author's life. The process of accounting is the systematic presentation and interpretation of accumulated data. For Alegría the process of amassing memories□sifting though them, choosing those of singular importance, the "electrical instants," and finally understanding their importance in her life□is similar to the work that an accountant does in assessing financial worth. Alegría is assessing her worth and defining it by key events. To finally understand the work of a lifetime, she also needed to have gained the wisdom to appreciate all that she had accomplished.

Style

Committed Generation

La generacion comprometida, also known as the Committed Generation, was created as an attempt by the intellectual sectors of the middle and upper classes of Central America as a way to use literature to achieve social justice. Alegría's ideological approach to her poetry reflects this literary movement. "Accounting" contains references to both social justice and human rights issues.

Elegy

In its origins in Greek and Latin poetry, the elegy was a meditation that might focus on death, but might equally call to mind love or almost any list of events. During the Elizabethan period, the English used the elegy as a love poem, often as a lover's complaint. During the seventeenth century, the elegy was most commonly used as a poem of mourning to honor the dead and to reflect upon a life that had ended. Since that time, the elegy has also been used as a poem to reflect on solemn events. In "Accounting," Alegría uses the elegy to reflect on her life. Just as an elegy might honor the dead, for this poem, the poet uses the format to evaluate and consider the events of her life.

Imagery

Imagery refers to the described images in a poem. The relationships between images can suggest important meanings in a poem; with imagery, the poet uses language and specific words to create meaning. For instance, "skipping puddles" suggests an image of a child at play, perhaps just after a rain. The "first wail of my daughter" creates an image of birth and the joy that a new child brings. Images allow the reader to "see" the events of a poet's life, rather than just read about them.

Memoir

A memoir is a form of autobiographical writing that deals with the memories of someone who has either witnessed important events or has taken part in significant events. Alegría's poem is an abbreviated form of the memoir, in the form of a poem rather than prose. However, the meaning is the same. The author is revealing her life to an audience of readers, who will use this material to learn something about the writer. In general, memoirs are told in chronological order; however, Alegría has chosen to list the important events of her life in an order than has special significance to her.

Narrative Poem

A narrative poem is a poem that tells a story. In "Accounting," the poem tells the story of Alegría's life. She offers small vignettes of her life, memories of the most "electrical" moments that shaped the adult she became. In this case, Alegría's narrative poem functions very much like an autobiography, except that the poet does not always list these events in chronological order.

Free Verse

The word "poem" is generally assigned to mean a literary composition distinguished by emotion, imagination, and meaning. But the term *poem* may also fit certain designated formulas, such as a sonnet or a couplet, which are defined by a specific length and or a particular rhyme scheme. A poem may also include divisions into stanzas, a sort of paragraph-like division of ideas, and may also include a specific number of stressed or unstressed syllables in each line. Alegría's poem is not divided into separate sections; instead it flows from one word and phrase into the next, without breaks for punctuation or stanza in a free verse form. Not one word is wasted in this poem. At just over 100 words, each word has to have significance as it flows to the next word. Modern poetry offers the poet a chance to experiment with style, since poetic style is no longer defined by the strict formulas of the early poets, but even the contemporary poet still strives for an impassioned response to his or her poem. Like the earliest poetry, modern poetry is still highly individualistic.

Historical Context

A Long History of Civil Conflict

Alegría's "Accounting" is the poet's reflection upon the events and people that fill a lifetime. The content of the poem reflects an indeterminate point in time and the locations are many. Because of this, one way to approach her poetry is to try and understand the place that Alegría most closely identifies as her homeland, as well as its crucial influence on her work. Nicaragua was colonized by the Spanish early in the sixteenth century, but it gained its independence from Spain in 1821, as did all of Central America. After 1855, the United States took an active part in controlling Nicaragua, with U.S. troops actively training and supervising the Nicaraguan military forces, which in turn controlled the government of Nicaragua. Alegría's father opposed this U.S. military interference and supported the rebel forces, and as a result, the family was forced to flee in 1925. The rebellions in Nicaragua did not end with the establishment of a U.S.-supported dictator, General Somoza, in 1934, but they were better suppressed under his leadership. After Somoza was assassinated in 1956, his sons continued as dictators, and like their father, bled the country of its wealth and resources. As the Somoza regime became wealthier, the people became poorer and more ravaged by the lack of the most basic necessities. The Samozas allocated little money to education, and since most Nicaraguan children needed to work to help support their families, few children were able to attend the few schools that were available. The government spent almost no money on basic infrastructure. Besides the malnutrition that afflicted the poor, lack of proper sanitation and limited access to health care led to many outbreaks of dysentery, which was a leading cause of death. Children also died of many of the diseases that modern medicine now prevents, such as tetanus and measles. Because of the economic oppression of the people, opposition to the Samoza regime increased.

Alegría actively supported the Sandinista rebels, who succeeded in overthrowing the old Somoza dictatorship and seizing control in July 1979. In response, the United States funded a counter-revolutionary group, the Contras, withheld economic aid, and imposed a trade embargo that further decimated the Nicaraguan economy. The civil wars in Nicaragua did not end until 1990. The rebellion cost was high, with at least 50,000 dead during the years of fighting. There were also more than 100,000 wounded, and as many as 40,000 children were orphaned. It is little wonder that Alegría mentions the "eyes of that starving child" in her poem.

Education and Health Care

After the Somoza period ended, the new Sandinista government set about to improve life for the citizens of Nicaragua. This is when Alegría returned to help rebuild her country. One area that received immediate attention was education. Before the Sandinista government took control, only about 22 percent of children completed the

minimum six years of primary schooling. Because secondary education was private and very expensive, very few children enrolled in secondary schools. Within five years, the new government had doubled the number of students enrolled in schools. With an increased budget for education, new schools were built and new teachers added. There was even an outreach program to educate adults through informal night schools, called Popular Education Cooperatives. The number of students continuing on to university study more than tripled in this short space of time. The emphasis on university study focused more on technology, agriculture, and medicine, rather than on the humanities or art.

It is worth noting that the U.S.-supported Contra wars forced cuts in education that eliminated many of the early gains created by the Sandinista government. This was also true of health care spending, which initially created improvements for the Nicaraguan people. Under the Somoza regime, wealthy upper-class Nicaraguans had access to private physicians or could go abroad to receive their medical care. A very small number of government workers comprised the middle class and had access to the Nicaraguan Social Security Institute, a sort of health maintenance organization that appropriated about half of the national health care budget. The remainder of the population, about 90 percent of all Nicaraguans, made due with public clinics, which were poorly funded and staffed. The Sandinista government unified the health care system, increased the budget for public health care, and improved access for the poorest members of the population. Community health care also improved and treatments for dysentery and inoculations against common childhood diseases were put in place. Unlike the improvements in education, many of the improvements in health care survived the Contra wars. Although there were some setbacks, infant mortality decreased and the population as a whole was healthier. In particular, issues relating to improving education and healthcare were priorities of the Sandinista government, which Alegría had worked so hard to support.

Critical Overview

Alegría's book of poetry, *Fugues*, received a generally unfavorable review by the anonymous writer at *Publishers Weekly*, who reviewed the book for the October 18, 1993 publication. Among this writer's criticisms was the length of many of the poems, which are described as "mere aphorisms." This reviewer also stated that the poems in this book were "[s]parse on imagery." The reviewer referred to these poems as "tidbits" that "ask little from readers, and give little back." An additional complaint focuses on the poet's use of classical figures from Greek mythology, whom according to the reviewer "seem wholly out of place in both her [Alegría's] physical and emotional landscape." The poems in *Fugues* were translated by the author's husband. This reviewer cites Flakoll's translation as one aspect of the book that does not work, calling the translation "littered with cliches." This review of Alegría's book ends with the admonition that readers who "open this book expecting the work of a master" will instead find a book that "reads like a naive first collection." At the end of the review, the book is given a D grade.

Alegría's publisher, Curbstone Press, also provides limited reviews of the books they publish, and while they are not an unbiased source, they do include a review of *Fugues* written by poet Luisa Valenzuela, who says, "Illumination is the word that comes to mind when reading these poems." Valenzuela explains that Alegría's "simple words . . . allow us to see the duality of life as one single luminous flow of love." While it would be easy to dismiss the reviews provided by Curbstone as just an effort to sell books, they support the general view of Alegría's poetry. The review of *Fugues* published by *Publishers Weekly* also contradicts the most common assessment of Alegría's body of work. In her essay, "The Volcano's Flower," Chilean poet Marjorie Agosín calls Alegría's poetry "clear and defined." Her poetry is "stirring" and it "moves us and liberates us, not just to feel but also to think." In a 1991 interview with Marcia Phillips McGowan, Alegría stated that her poetry was "subjective." Clearly, reviews of her poetry are also subjective, and so perhaps that accounts for the wide disparity in opinions of reviewers of her work.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Metzger has a doctorate in English Renaissance literature and teaches literature and drama at the University of New Mexico, where she is a lecturer in the University Honors Program. In this essay, Metzger discusses Alegría's appropriation of the classical elegiac form to memorialize her own life.

As she approaches the period that she calls "old age," Claribel Alegría responds by composing her own elegy, "Accounting," for which she uses a traditional poetic form to reflect upon the events of her life. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Alegría described this poem as having been created as a result of a period of reflection in which she asked herself, "what have been the crucial moments in my life?" In reflecting on her life, she chose "a few electrical instants" so that she could create a poem that would, as she related to Moyers, "sum up *all* my life." This poem accomplishes this goal, transforming determinate elements of time□"six hours in Macchu Pichu," "the ten minutes it took / to lose my virginity," and "fifteen minutes in Delft"□into a timeless eternity. The poet ensures with this poem that the indeterminate moments of her lifetime will not be lost when she has died. "Accounting" demonstrates Alegría's ability to transform the elegiac form to not only reflect upon the life she has lived, but also to honor that life. While the traditional mourning elegy can be used to honor and defend a life, Alegría demonstrates how the elegy can be altered to proclaim the poet's own life within the lines of her poem.

In "Accounting," Alegría composes a list of the crucial moments of her life. The people and places and the moments of joy and sorrow show individual moments from a lifetime of nearly seventy years. She inventories places she has visited, her love for a newborn child and for her spouse, and the deaths of those individuals whose presence in her life was critical in defining her experiences. In writing down these memories, Alegría reveals them to all her readers, even as she keeps them vibrant in her own life. The process for keeping her memories alive is the same for Alegría, regardless of the format used to reveal them. For instance, in a 1991 interview with Marcia Phillips McGowan, Alegría explained that one way she has been able to keep her family's memories alive was through the characters that she creates in her novels. She does this through telling stories and examining pictures, and then she incorporates these memories into her stories. Alegría does much the same thing in this poem. Alegría sifts through the memories of a lifetime, chooses fewer than a dozen, and then examines them, as she would a photo, studying each one as she arranges them into a montage that signifies her life. In this interview, Alegría tells McGowan that one of her "pervasive themes is nostalgia," and indeed, the title of one of the poems in *Fugues*, from which "Accounting" is taken, is "Nostalgia." The poet's nostalgia for the past, for the memories that she recalls in "Accounting," is an important component in defining her life. Alegría claims that it is "a great richness to recover memories" and preserve them in her writing. With "Accounting," she chooses to preserve her memories in an elegy that also honors and preserves her life for as long as her poems endure. Traditionally, an elegy can become an effective way to honor someone's life after death, but for Alegría, the elegy serves to reflect upon her life and anticipate her death.

Although Alegría is comfortable expressing her thoughts using an elegy, she makes it uniquely her own by challenging both the classical English and the Spanish elegiac traditions. In the classical elegiac tradition, the poem consists of a specific arrangement of lines that was notable for its use of the elegiac meter□an alternating hexameter and pentameter arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables. Alegría dispenses with this classical form to use free verse, which is her accustomed mode of expression. She deviates from the traditional form in other ways, as well. In her essay, "Claribel Alegría and the Elegiac Tradition," Jo Anne Engelbert explores how Alegría uses the elegy in her poetry as a means to celebrate life rather than death. Engelbert begins her essay by quoting poet Pedro Salinas, who outlines some of the ways in which Central American poets use the elegiac tradition. According to Englebert, Salinas claimed that the elegy was "always, in the last analysis, a protest, a struggle against death." In fact, even if the poet appears accepting of his or her death, his or her use of poetry is designed "in order that something not perish." Thus the very use of poetry itself, counters the "serene resignation" of the elegy. This inconsistency is evident in Alegría's personal elegy. "Accounting" captures the author's ambivalence to the recognition that she will be preserved for all eternity in her poem. The resignation is present but so is the urge to fight. For example, in lines 24 and 25, she writes that she is "a shout" before she disappears in "a fleck of foam."

In her interview with Moyers, Alegría explains that while the poem "would sum up" her life, "I also wanted to cry out to everybody, a desperate cry telling them what has happened." At the same time, she wants to become "a fleck of foam," and as she tells Moyers, just "disappear and float in the air." In just these last few lines of "Accounting," Alegría exemplifies the paradox that Salinas had noted□the need to "survive that very death whose acceptance is being extolled." Alegría's poem defies the traditional elegy in other ways, as well. Engelbert explains that the Spanish elegiac tradition begins with laments, an expression of grief at the life that has ended. In contrast, Alegría's elegy begins with a celebration of her life. Since her elegy seeks to preserve the memories of her life, there is no need to lament the past. Even as she subverts the Spanish tradition, Alegría claims that she does not intentionally set out to defy or rewrite traditional genres. But she does tell McGowan that "maybe I do so unconsciously." When critics tell her that she is defying traditions, Alegría does not dissent and accepts this judgment even while she explains that "I myself am never conscious of it." Engelbert is one of the critics who has observed Alegría's efforts to challenge and transform modes of traditional poetry. Englebert claims that Alegría's "absence of verbal opulence," the brevity of language, transforms the traditional elegy. Rather than the conventional response to the bereaved, Alegría's elegy memorializes her own life as a celebration of endurance and change. The need for excess, for expressions of grandeur and superfluous accomplishments, are not necessary devices for Alegría to memorialize her life in an elegy.

In her interview with McGowan, Alegría mentioned that she had recently completed a new collection of poetry called *Fugues*. She explained that the book's "main themes are love, death, and the encounter with old age." All of the themes from this book are captured in the one poem that is the subject of this study: "Accounting." In the final lines of the poem, Alegría considers the concluding event of her life□her death. She

describes how she has "the urge to mould myself into a verse," and so not only will her memories be preserved□she will be preserved within the poem's own lines. In recognizing the poet's ability to memorialize a life, in this case her own, Alegría follows in a long tradition of poets who acknowledged that poetry was one way to cheat death.

William Shakespeare was one of the first poets to recognize that his own work would transcend the "gilded monuments / Of princes." In Sonnet 55, Shakespeare tells the object of the poem, the young man, that this poem shall be "The living record of your memory." Long after marble monuments have been "besmeared with sluttish time," the young man will live on, since his "praise shall find room / Even in the eyes of all posterity." Shakespeare returns to this theme in Sonnet 81, when he again tells the young man that "your memory death cannot take" because "Your monument shall be my gentle verse." As Gerald Hammond notes in his text, *The Reader and Shakespeare's Young Man Sonnets*, Shakespeare's poem "is a claim for the immortality of his subject." Rather than be placed in the tomb, or in "a common grave," the young man is placed within the poem, where he will be "entombèd in men's eyes." Alegría mimics this idea in her own poem when she disappears in the final line of her poem, into "a fleck of foam." Clearly Alegría is four-hundred years and far removed from Renaissance English poetry, and yet, the recognition by the poet that verse can give life to that which death has removed is a view that extends beyond time and space. Alegría might subvert classical English elegiac meter, but she still makes effective use of the traditional Shakespearean model.

There are importance distinctions between Shakespeare's recognition that poetry creates a lasting memory and Alegría's bid to compress her life into twenty-six lines of poetry. Shakespeare's Sonnet 55 and Sonnet 81 are not about the poet. There is no attempt by the poet to preserve his own life or to account for the events that have transformed or defined his life. There is no self-consciousness in these two poems, as there is in Alegría's poem. In his study of Shakespeare's sonnets, *Shakespeare and English Renaissance Sonnet*, author Paul Innes claims that "Sonnet 55 is the definitive enactment" of the poet's desire to "sustain for ever the truth and beauty of the friend." In contrast, Alegría makes no similar claim for her poetry. Her poem is meant to convey memories and not absolute truths. Another important difference between Alegría's poem and Shakespeare's sonnets is that the reader begins to know Alegría after reading her poem. This is not true for Shakespeare's sonnets 55 and 81, which contain no descriptions of the young man. He remains a mystery, whether one sonnet or the entire sequence is studied. While Shakespeare's sonnets claim to keep the young man's memory alive beyond the grave, as Hammond observes, the poems manage "to keep him entirely hidden" from the reader's view. The historical reality is that scholars are still uncertain who the young man was, while readers will have no difficulty in determining who Alegría was. Her life will remain in plain view for each generation of readers to understand.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, Critical Essay on "Accounting," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Potter is a university writing instructor and fiction writer living in San Francisco. In this essay, Potter shows how Alegría adds up the significant moments in her life to transform her experiences into verse through a series of poetic turns.

Fugues (1993), Claribel Alegría's collection of elegies and love poems, contains the poem "Accounting," a tally of experiences singled out as "electrical instants" in the aging poet's life. As a reviewer commented in *Booklist*, the collection is "lyrical" and "speaks of the solitary self and the self that is lost and found in love." Likewise, in "Accounting" the poet draws on past experiences in order to gather this self back to the present moment of composition, through which she desires to be transformed. Alegría wants to transmogrify herself "into a verse," to change her form into something surprising and perhaps strange, like a "shout" and "a fleck of foam." In this poem, Alegría uses her craft to achieve a metamorphosis. Arranging sensory images in lines that create dramatic tension, the poet's goal is a complete change in appearance and character. Sixty-eight years old at the time of the poem's writing, Alegría faces her own mortality, so by the end of the poem, she releases herself into the poet's domain□the natural world of sound and images.

Born in Nicaragua in 1924, Alegría is the leading poetic spokesperson in support of the Sandanista movement (FSLN) to restore democracy to her homeland, which fought against and overthrew the U.S.-backed Somoza regime in 1979. Because of her father's close alliance with Somoza himself, from early childhood on she was raised in exile in El Salvador. Educated in America, she met her husband in college, the journalist Darwin J. Flakoll, who also translated most of her works. For decades, they collaborated on numerous testimonies to revolutionary movements throughout Latin America. In an earlier collection of poetry, *Woman of the River*, Flakoll translates "Accounting" as "Summing Up." The poem's title in Spanish, "Contabilizando," means to "calculate, reckon, count up," and in these twenty-six lines the poet experiences a reckoning, adding up the "few" moments in her life that really count. While accounting is a mathematical process, logical and precise, she uses it to play against the mysterious and transformative power of the poetic process. In another poem in *Fugues*, "Ars Poetica," she celebrates the literary craft that draws her closer both to understanding the transformative power of commonplace objects or experiences and to political awakening. While one plus one equals two in ordinary accounting, the minutes and memories that Alegría adds up in her poetry do not yield a predictable result. By the poem's end, her accounting comes undone.

This mysterious process is fueled by her political consciousness as much as it is by her deliberate craft. Whereas her early collections, from 1948 to 1961, were more strictly literary, at times sentimental, introspective, and lyrical, after 1965 her work changes direction toward *letras de emergencia*, wherein the emerging spirit of her work is an urgent response to a crisis situation. In this way, "Accounting" embodies her political conviction as it satisfies her "urge to mould" herself "into a verse."

"Accounting" is also a poetic composition, an arrangement of sounds and images into lines that create a drama. The first fifteen lines alternate between precise memories of her life and sensory details. The poem's tension increases through a pattern of turns on these moments and images firmly fixed in her memory. It may look like a simple poem of casually recollected memories, but the arrangement of its lines is intentional and intricate. First, the "electrical instants" she quantifies are "six hours in Macchu Pichu," "ten minutes necessary / to lose my virginity," "fifteen minutes in Delft," and "this sultry hour" when she is writing the poem. Interspersed amid this chronology of her life are sounds like "the buzzing of the telephone / while awaiting the death of my mother," "the hoarse voice / announcing the death [assassination] / of Monsignor Romero," and, turning away from the theme of death to birth, "the first wail of my daughter." Then, in the sixteenth line, the poem takes its most unexpected turn, unfurling into "I don't know how many years / dreaming of my people's liberation." She defies time itself by framing these years as an "electrical instant" that encapsulates the Nicaraguan struggle and in the line that follows, the oxymoronic "certain immortal deaths." She has lost track of the time she has spent yearning for her people's freedom, and during these decades, the countless lives lost. Lives that were lost fighting injustice achieve immortality, Alegría believes, as in this poem and in her memory the significance of such lives cannot be touched by time or tallied like a body count. Just as the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero by a member of the Salvadoran death squads in 1980 was both another turning point for Alegría and the start of her political career, so his assassination in "Accounting" receives singular notice. After 1980, her works became mostly *testimonios* or testimonies of the traditionally voiceless, oppressed people, speaking out against government-sponsored terrorism in Central America and other regions.

In the first seventeen lines, the poet accounts for two "deaths" before turning to the "immortal deaths." In the next two lines, she takes another dramatic turn, moving from sound to sight, recreating "the eyes of that starving child" and "your eyes bathing me with love / one forget-me-not afternoon." She replaces the eyes of a dying child with the eyes of her lover as she once remarked that "mis poemas son poemas de amor a mis pueblos" (my poems are love poetry for my people). Death and love combined summon her back to her current "electrical instant," the present hour, when she sits yearning to change herself through verse into "the shout" and "a fleck of foam." As if she were carefully fording a stream, turning to find her next foothold stone by stone, in this poem she moves among the sounds and sights of her past to sum up her life and transform it. She is able to do this by establishing a pattern of moments alternating with sensory details, building dramatic tension, then breaking this pattern to achieve metamorphosis in the poem.

Critic Sandra Maria Boschetto-Sandoval writes in "Claribel Alegría: Overview," "As poet, essayist, journalist, novelist of fantastic fiction, and writer of *testimonio*, Alegría functions in a manner very similar to that of a cartographer. Tracing the heights, depths, and contours of her memory, Alegría charts the . . . regions of her psyche. The effect is not unlike that of a series of symmetrical mirrors, simultaneously reflecting inward and outward." She remarks further, "To situate Alegría's opus within its Latin American sociohistoric and political context is to . . . ground reality in a specific historic moment when subjects come to see themselves as integral parts of a collective process of

intervention in history." Through poetry, poets attain immortality, and in "Accounting," Alegría reaches past the temporal limitations of her years on earth to place herself in history, among her generation of writers committed to artistic, political, and social engagement. By adding up all of the moments that have mattered, she finds that they are incalculable.

Source: Mary Potter, Critical Essay on "Accounting," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Make a list of ten to twelve of your own memories. These should be the things that first come to mind when you think of your life. You might try to pick one or two items from each of the past several years. After you have a list, arrange them in some order of importance. This order does not have to be chronological, but it can be. When you have brought some sort of order to your list, rewrite it as a poem. Alegría writes her poem as a narrative lyric, but you can use a different poetic format, if you wish.

Research the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero, whom Alegría mentions in her poem. Consider why she thought him such an important figure in trying to call attention to human rights violations in El Salvador.

Choose one poem by another Central American poet, and compare his or her work to the poetry of Alegría. What similarities do you notice? Are there differences in theme or content? You might consider using poetry by Magdalena Gomez, Sandra Maria Esteves, or Ricardo Morales.

Research the role of both men and women in the Nicaraguan revolution. Consider in what ways the contributions of women differed from those of men.

Alegría's poem is a memoir, recounting the events of her life. Most people who write memoirs do so as prose writing. Choose a memoir by any other writer and discuss the differences between prose and verse memoirs.

Compare and Contrast

1990s Nicaragua: In May 1997, university students begin a more than two-month protest of the government's decision to cut university budgets by nine million dollars. While the protests are initially peaceful, they soon escalate into street wars with many injuries and arrests resulting.

1990s United States: While in the past there have been some localized student protests on U.S. campuses, most frequently about tuition raises or cuts in student aid, few students undertake a lengthy months-long protest over budget concerns. In recent years, protests over U.S. involvement in foreign wars elicit the strongest non-economic based protests on university campuses.

1990s Nicaragua: In 1998, Nicaragua has the highest teen pregnancy rate of any country in Central America. It is thought that forty to forty-five percent of all pregnancies involve girls aged fourteen to nineteen. Pregnant girls are not able to complete their education, and are thus unable to find employment to support their children. Teenage pregnancy also results in social exclusion and rejection by the girl's family.

1990s United States: Teenage and unwed pregnancies also increase in the United States during the last two decades. Many school districts encourage pregnant teenagers to stay in school and, in many instances, offer special programs to adapt schooling needs to fit the requirements of the pregnant teenager. In addition, several local community programs work to provide health care and social services to single mothers.

1990s Nicaragua: In 1997, the government of Nicaragua is accused of trying to silence opposition radio and newspaper outlets. In part, this practice results from broadcast and print accounts of the student protests, which are marked by episodes of police brutality. This effort to close down opposition media outlets fails after the public demands an investigation.

1990s United States: While the government does not try and close down media outlets that provide criticism of the government, there is questioning of the large corporate ownership of media outlets that are thought to restrict free speech. For instance, in many cities, multiple radio stations, multiple television stations, and local newspapers are often owned by the same large corporations. The result is that diverse opinions are oftentimes not heard.

1990s Nicaragua: While abortion is illegal in Nicaragua, it is actually quite common. Wealthier women have easier access to medical abortion, while poor women are at greater risk in seeking more dangerous alternatives.

1990s United States: Abortion continues to be legal in the United States, although it continues to be a controversial topic. In addition to legal challenges, there are also a number of violent attacks on abortion clinics and doctors who perform abortions.

1990s Nicaragua: The number of women who are employed outside the home in Nicaragua continues to increase since the early 1980s. In general, women work in low-wage jobs, especially in service-type employment, as domestic workers and as agricultural workers. In spite of so many women now in the work force, few men assist in the domestic chores of home, and so women continue to be responsible for maintaining the household even if they choose to also work outside the home.

1990s United States: More women than ever hold managerial positions or serve as directors of major corporations. However, wages for women are still roughly 30 percent less than for men performing comparable jobs.

What Do I Read Next?

Published by Curbstone Press and edited and translated by Alegría and her husband, Darwin J. Flakoll, *On the Front Line: Guerilla Poems of El Salvador* (1996) is an anthology of poetry written by El Salvadorian revolutionaries.

Sorrow (1999) is a collection of poetry that Alegría wrote after the death of her husband.

In Alegría's collection *Casting Off* (2003), many of the poems deal with death and with the poet's thoughts about approaching the end of her life.

The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets (1995) contains the transcripts of more than 30 interviews that Bill Moyers conducted with contemporary poets. This book is a companion to Moyer's public television series *The Language of Life*.

Nicaragua: The Sandinista Revolution; A Political Chronicle 1855—1979 (1982) is a nonfiction account of the revolution, written by Alegría and her husband, Flakoll.

Latin American Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology (1996), edited by Stephen Tapscott, includes poetry by more than 75 Latin American poets.

After the Revolution: Gender and Democracy in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala (2001), written by Ilja A. Luciak, provides data and interviews about the democratization of guerilla movements and the link to gender inequality in this region.

Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979—1999 (2001), written by Lorraine Bayard de Volo, is the story of how women who did not fight in the revolution supported it through the sacrifice of their sons.

Further Study

Agosín, Marjorie, ed., *These Are Not Sweet Girls: Latin American Women Poets*, White Pine Press, 1995.

This anthology of Latin American poets includes poets from the beginning to the end of the twentieth century. The poems are arranged thematically, and the editor has included lesser-known poets to balance the inclusion of those who are well known.

Alegría, Claribel, *Death of Somoza*, Curbstone Press, 1996.

This is a nonfiction book that reads like a novel, as the author relates the attempts of Somoza's own self-appointed assassins to murder the dictator.

Heyck, Denis Lynn Daly, *Life Stories of the Nicaraguan Revolution*, Routledge, 1990.

This book contains the stories of twenty-four individuals. The book is divided into political lives, religious lives, and survivors' lives.

Kunzle, David, *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1979—1992*, University of California Press, 1995.

After the Sandinista revolution in 1979, more than 300 murals were created that depicted the issues that Nicaragua was facing at the time of the revolution. After the Sandinista government was voted out of office in 1990, many of the murals were destroyed. This book is one way to preserve them.

Ramirez, Sergio, and D. J. Flakoll, *Hatful of Tigers: Reflections on Art, Culture and Politics*, Curbstone Press, 1995.

This book is a collection of essays that explores the U.S. involvement in supporting the Somoza dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s. It is very much an indictment of U.S. policy in Central America.

Randall, Margaret, and Floyce Alexander, eds., *Risking a Somersault in the Air: Conversations with Nicaraguan Writers*, Curbstone Press, 1990.

This book is a collection of interviews with fourteen Nicaraguan writers whose writings were important in the period leading up to and following Nicaragua's revolution.

Rushdie, Salman, *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey*, Henry Holt, 1997.

This book was the result of Rushdie's 1986 visit, during which he witnessed events as diverse as political protests and poetry recitals. Rushdie also includes interviews with soldiers and observations about ordinary life in Nicaragua.

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Moyers, Bill, "Claribel Alegría," in *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets*, edited by James Haba, Doubleday, 1995, pp. 5—16.

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Review of *Fugues*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 240, No. 42, October 18, 1993, p. 69.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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