All It Takes Study Guide

All It Takes by Carl Phillips

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Carl Phillips, the author of □All It Takes,□ is one of the fastest-rising stars in the literary world. From his first collection of poems in 1992, *In the Blood*, through his seventh collection, *The Rest of Love*, published in 2004, he has won numerous awards and honors. While it is often lauded for its treatment of the black and gay themes that are central to his identity, Phillips's work is usually deeply imbued with classical allusions and complex imagery that makes his readers see what they know with a new sense of enlightenment.

In □All It Takes□ (from the book *The Rest of Love*), Phillips explores the things of the physical world that cannot be directly observed□those things that are knowable only through, as he puts it, □the visible effects by which we know them.□ The poem moves with ease from observation of common occurrences to reflection on those uncommon events (like the last berries clinging to a dying vine in winter) to suggestions that what we know of the world is nothing more than what the ancient cultures knew when they devised their own mythologies. Although these ideas could steer a less commanding poet into different directions, Phillips stays on course, holding □All It Takes□ together as a dreamy meditation on the nature of reality.

Author Biography

Ethnicity: African-American

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1959

Carl Phillips was born on July 23, 1959, in Everett, Washington. As the product of a mixed-race marriage□his father was a medic in the Air Force and an African American, while his mother, a painter and homemaker, was white□he grew up with the sense of being an outsider. This outsider status was exaggerated by the fact that his family moved constantly in the first ten years of Phillips's life, as his father was assigned to different military bases throughout the United States and Europe. It was while he was living in Zweibrücken, Germany, when he was a young teen, that he first discovered an affinity for languages. He studied Latin and Greek when the family returned to America, showing such proficiency that he majored in those languages at Harvard, graduating with a bachelor's degree in 1981. He wrote some poetry at Harvard and worked on the staff of the *Harvard Advocate*, a literary magazine.

After college, Phillips taught Latin in several high schools throughout the 1980s. He was married for a short while but soon divorced when he came to understand his homosexuality. During this period, he did not write much. His writing was reinvigorated at a poetry workshop that he attended at Castle Hill Center for the Arts in Truro, Massachusetts, in 1990.

Once he started writing, Phillips's output was prodigious and impressive. Within a few months, he had produced the poems that would make up his first poetry collection, *In the Blood*, which won the Samuel French Morse Poetry Prize when it was published in 1992. He then returned to school, earning his master's degree from Boston University, where he studied under the poet Robert Pinsky. His 1995 collection, *Cortége*, was a finalist for the National Book Award and *From the Devotions*, published in 1998, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. He has since published poems and poetry collections at a constant rate: *The Rest of Love*, the 2004 collection in which □All It Takes□ appears, is his seventh collection and was also a National Book Award finalist. Phillips has been a Guggenheim Fellow and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a 2004 recipient of an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He lives in St. Louis, Missouri, where he is a professor of English and African and Afro-American Studies at Washington University.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-3

Phillips starts □All It Takes□ by reinforcing the title, echoing the meaning of □all□ with the poem's first word, □any.□ While the title of the poem leaves open the suggestion of what might be necessary, the first line narrows the subject of the work down to a □force,□ proceeding to define what might be considered to be forces.

The second and third lines suggest phenomena that might be regarded as the kinds of forces the poem is talking about, offering readers a range from positive to negative, aggressive to benign. □Generosity□ is, of course, thought to be one of the most selfless of human attributes; □sudden updraft□ is a breeze that is beyond the control of an individual; □fear□ is one of the most destructive of human emotions. What they all have in common, as pointed out in line 3, is that they cannot be seen by the human eye.

Lines 4-6

In the second stanza, the poem focuses on the ways in which people can understand phenomena that are not directly experienced by the senses. Phillips explains that they have □effects by which we know them.□ Unlike emotions, gestures can be observed, and the emotions to which those gestures correspond can be understood by interpreting the gestures. At the end of line 5, Phillips uses the word □betrayed□ and then employs the same word once again at the start of line 6, to imply that the revealed emotions are reluctant to have their natures exposed by the gestures that reveal them. Repeating the word gives a feeling of sadness to the process, as if the emotions acknowledge the inevitability of the fact that they must be revealed.

The second stanza ends with an image from nature. Fog is sometimes so light that it cannot be seen by the naked eye; still, even when it is not visible, the moisture that it leaves hanging in the air will accumulate on the skin, so that the body can feel what surrounds it more clearly than the eye can see it.

Lines 7-9

Building on the image of fog, the poem moves from the issue of transparency to the feeling of being engulfed. The fog is referred to in line 7 as □it,□ though the poem does not actually state that the winter berries are □inside it□ until two lines later, weaving a complex verbal path that resembles, in its twists and turns, the dense thicket in which the berries grow. A thicket is frequently used as a metaphor for a place so dense that things are hidden from view within it, but line 8 refers to a □thicket of nowhere left to hide□: the poem is downplaying the importance of physical distraction, placing emphasis instead on the meaning of the thicket. A person might not be able to see through the thicket, but one knows what is in it, and, in that sense, it hides nothing. The

winter berries are an anomaly: while berries and fruit often grow in the summer, on plants nurtured by the photosynthesis of their leaves, these berries are unguarded and cold, seeming to grow from their own force of will.

Lines 10-12

The first word of this stanza, "shine," emphasizes the radiance of the winter berries. Usually such berries on barren branches would be viewed as pitiful objects, abandoned and forgotten, but Phillips uses their isolation to emphasize their individuality, showing how surviving through the winter makes the berries stand out, even in the dense fog and within the center of a thicket.

In lines 10 and 11, Phillips makes a statement about the nature of belief: that it is necessary only after the ability to have faith comes into existence. This contradicts common sense, which would generally hold that the need for belief would create the ability to believe. By reversing this order, the poem puts out a positive, uplifting message: the emphasis on the ability, rather than the need, takes away the sense of desperation. The poem says that belief is not something that has to be found but rather is inherent in consciousness from the very beginning.

The reference to ancient Greeks and Romans in line 12 supports the innate ability to believe, tracing this ability back through the centuries. The poem does not expect readers to just accept this claim, but instead offers proof that ability has preceded need throughout most of recorded history.

Lines 13-15

The Greek goddess of love is Aphrodite, referred to in Roman mythology as Venus. Although her association with beauty might lead people to assume that Aphrodite led a serene life, she was, in fact, a lively participant in the affairs of men and gods. She was, for instance, instrumental in turning the Trojan War into a prolonged and bloody battle: the assembled armies agreed that they would abide by the result of a one-on-one fight between Menelaus, the husband of Helen of Troy, and Paris, her lover, but Aphrodite was so in love with Paris that she removed him and protected him, forcing the battle into a conflict involving thousands of men. There are many other instances in which Aphrodite proved to be an adventurer—the "wild god" mentioned in the poem.

The goddess of fidelity is Hera, the wife of Zeus, the king of the gods. Although she was not necessarily small in stature, as the poem suggests, her exploits were tamer than those of Aphrodite. The most widely known myth about Hera concerns her participation in the judgment of Paris, the event that began the Trojan War: three goddesses (Aphrodite, Hera, and Athena) asked the mortal Paris to judge which of them was fairest, with Aphrodite winning because she bribed Paris with the love of Helen, considered to be the most beautiful of mortal women.

The poem reverses expectations in lines 14 and 15 by stating that the speaker is □no less grateful for the berries than for the thorns□: normally, one would consider a person to be vastly more grateful for the berries and to perhaps bring the balance close to even by elevating the position of the thorns, saying, □I am no less grateful for the thorns than for the berries.□ The way that Phillips puts it, though, makes it seem as if people would expect him to be grateful for the thorns but not the berries.

Lines 16-18

This stanza concerns the balance of nature. The speaker carries over the thought that began on line 15, that the thorns on a bush are probably meant to be helpful, not harmful. The interjection of □I think□ in line 16 reminds readers that what the poet is saying is all far from certain in his mind. If thorns do serve a positive purpose, then there is more order to the world than is apparent from looking at it, just like an invisible fog or a blindingly dense thicket. The □quiet arrangement□ mentioned in line 18 supports this idea of an unstated order to the world that one must take on faith, without concrete evidence. It is a balance between violence and beauty, captured by bonding together the words □cut□ and □flowers.□

Lines 19-21

The poem ends with images of death. Eyes that are lidless are eyes that are always open, on vigilant watch. Death, on the other hand, is usually described as a kind of sleep, most likely because it resembles sleep, in which the body lies still with closed eyes. In this poem, though, the expectations are reversed: the author tells his reader to □make death the one whose eyes are lidless.□ Thus, he says that death should be the state of constant alertness and that life, by contrast, should be a state of ease and contentment.

In the line before last, the speaker finally mentions another person, a □you.□ This person is described first as leaving and then as having □crossed the water,□ a reference to ancient mythology, where the dead were ferried across the river Styx into the underworld when they died. Having already urged the reader to look at death as a time of awareness, the poem tells the reader that death is not an abstract, future event to be dealt with at some later date; it is already here. The main part of the poem is focused on making readers aware of the unseen things in this world, but the ending lines point in the direction of the ultimate unknowable state, death.

Themes

Invisibility

The main theme of □All It Takes□ is the way in which people know truths that do not derive from the direct evidence of their experience. The poem starts off by talking about □things invisible,□ which are not directly seen but are nonetheless familiar because of their effects. One example from the physical world is an updraft: a wind that has no visible presence but which is evident in snow or leaves or dust swirling in an obvious order. There are also examples of emotions□generosity and fear□that do not have any physical presence in themselves but that set off events that are experienced. People believe in these invisible phenomena without being able to know them directly through the senses because the physical evidence points to the existence of the invisible.

Later in the poem, Phillips talks about things that are just as invisible, love and fidelity. Regarding these emotions, he points out how the ancient Greeks and Romans gave them physical characteristics by personifying them as gods. These gods, with vastly different personalities, could be imagined by artists, and their images could be painted and sculpted, so that people could imagine that they saw love and fidelity before their eyes or at least the characteristics that make such emotions knowable.

In the last stanza, the poem refers to death's having lidless eyes. Given the previous focus on trying to see things that are invisible, this stanza seems to imply that death is a futile search for meaning, while life is enriched by the knowledge that some things just cannot be seen.

Contradiction

Phillips fills this poem with contradictory ideas. The most obvious, of course, is the contrast between things that can be experienced directly by the senses, such as flowers, dampness, and berries, and those that are familiar to the mind but have no real physical presence, like generosity and fear, love and fidelity. There are, however, other, more subtle contradictions woven throughout the poem. The unseen fog, which is recognized only by its accumulated wetness, is contrasted with the thicket, which surrounds like fog but is very tangible. The berries are a contradiction because they are winter berries: most berries need the full warmth of summer to grow. The god of love is contrasted with the god of fidelity, and cut flowers in a vase are contrasted with the uncut flowers that grow out of the ground, in a □quiet arrangement□ all over the world.

All of these contradictory notions are used to show that life has room for complexity. It is not a simple world that is being described in □All It Takes,□ but rather one that can hold truths that are the opposite of other truths. A simple poem might have the strength to examine only a narrow view of life, but this is not a simple poem. It uses few words in

short stanzas, but within that compact density, it has room to challenge the imagination and to make readers question their understanding of reality.

Love

In identifying the Greek and Roman manifestations of love as □a wild god,□ □All It Takes□ is not necessarily saying that love itself must be wild, just that its visual representation must be. The main idea of the poem is that abstractions like emotions cannot be known except through the physical manifestations associated with them. Wildness might be necessary to capture the idea of love, but love, like the berries shining in the middle of the thicket, might have a quiet essence that is not necessarily reflected by the wild god but is just pointed toward. This would explain why Phillips provides the contrasting image of a □small, tame□ god for fidelity: fidelity is a form of love, but it does not need very much activity to represent it. Readers might think □tame□ is somewhat less interesting than □wild□ and interpret this passage as Phillips's way of saying that fidelity is less interesting, and therefore less valuable, than love. This would be a mistaken impression that the following line works to dispel. □I am no less grateful for the berries than for the thorns□ tells the reader that the berries can also be considered tame, but they are just as much valued as the thorns.

Style

Analogy

Phillips bases his explanation of emotions on analogies to the actions of things in the physical world. An *analogy* draws a comparison between the similarities of two unlike things: one might make the assumption, for example, that a bird will be able to fly because its wings resemble those of other birds who use their wings to fly. In □All It Takes,□ the fact that a fog that is unseen can still be recognized by the dampness that it creates in one's clothes can help readers understand, by analogy, how emotions can be recognized even though they cannot be seen. Similarly, the characteristics that the Greeks and Romans gave to the emotions of love and fidelity can tell modern readers, by analogy, the prevailing attitude toward those same emotions.

Caesura

A caesura is a pause in the middle of a line of poetry. It is usually used to break up a long poetic line. Writers like Phillips are just as likely to place a caesura in a medium-length line in order to better control the poem's rhythm, especially in a work like □All It Takes,□ which is not written in a strict metric pattern. In this poem, Phillips uses four punctuation marks for pauses: the comma, the semicolon, the dash, and the period. In a case like line 3 (□Fear. Things invisible,□), he uses the pause to redirect the flow of the argument that he is making by bringing things to a halt with a period and starting a new sentence. Line 5□□we know them. Human gesture. Betrayed,□□starts two new sentences, as the narration stops to comment on the ideas already raised. There are, in fact, numerous spots in this poem where Phillips uses two caesuras in a line: lines 7, 9, 12, 13, 16, 18, and 20 all halt the flow of words twice. The frequent pauses give the poem a thoughtful tone, conveying a narrative voice that is carefully considering the implications of each thing said and is struggling to get the wording of difficult concepts exactly right.

Historical Context

Civil Liberties

In 2004, the year that this poem was first published, American culture was in the process of redefining the distinctions between what is private, □invisible□ to the public eye, and what is in the public interest. Things that had once been left invisible were no longer shielded by concepts of □privacy,□ but were instead opened up to public scrutiny in an attempt to keep ahead of the enemy in the war on terrorism. Two and a half years after the destruction in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania caused by plane hijackers on September 11, 2001, and a year after the country went to war to overthrow the Baathist regime in Iraq, American law enforcement authorities were vigilant against further terrorist activities enacted against the United States on American soil. Color-coded alerts about the likelihood of terrorist attacks were issued by the Department of Homeland Security, alternating between yellow (□Significant Risk□) and orange (□High Risk□).

In this climate of caution, many Americans willingly accepted a reassessment of what constituted the public interest. The USA PATRIOT Act, passed by Congress six weeks after the 2001 terrorist attacks, gave the government broad new powers to conduct searches without warrants, to subpoena bank and library records, to track Internet usage, and to monitor the movements of citizens. During the 2004 election year, there was sharp debate about whether these measures, meant to stop terrorism before it had a chance to inflict more damage, were worth the cost in civil liberties. As Phillips examined the ways that the outside world can come to understand what is hidden from view in □All It Takes,□ the country was in the middle of coming to grips with the fact that previous social norms for what was and what was not private were being redefined.

Marriage

As a writer who has been with the same partner for years and is frequently cited for the homosexual themes explored in his works, Phillips would have certainly been aware of the national debate throughout 2003 and 2004 regarding same-sex marriage. The issue grew in the nation's consciousness after Holland voted to expand the definition of marriage to allow homosexuals to wed. Belgium followed in 2003, and after that came referendums throughout the Canadian provinces, eventually permitting same-sex marriage in most of Canada. In November of 2003, the Supreme Judicial Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts ruled that that state's constitution did not allow the state to deny homosexuals the right to marry; marriage licenses for same-sex couples were issued in Massachusetts as of May 17, 2004.

Once same-sex marriage was recognized in one state, the issue was debated throughout the country. In the city of San Francisco, the mayor ordered city clerks to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples in February of 2004, only to have the

marriages halted the following month by the state supreme court. Several other cities across the country considered the legal responsibility of recognizing same-sex marriages.

One result of this flurry of activity was that it energized the opposition to same-sex marriage. In November of 2004, eleven states voted to pass amendments to limit the definition of marriage to include only one man and one woman, raising the number of states with prohibitions from three before 2004; in addition, thirty-seven states have passed some form of the Defense of Marriage Act to prohibit gay marriages. At a time when gays were struggling for public recognition of their relationships, Phillips, in □All It Takes,□ focused on the □quiet arrangements□ that occur when the visible and the invisible interact.

Critical Overview

Phillips has been considered an important American poet ever since the publication of his first collection of poems, *In the Blood*, in 1992. That book, which won the Morse Poetry Prize, prompted *Publishers Weekly* to describe Phillips as □an unusually accomplished and innovative poet,□ noting that he had □developed his own painful but luminous method□ of examining the world. His reputation has grown since that book, up to and including *The Rest of Love*, the book in which □All It Takes□ appears.

In her review of *The Rest of Love* for *Library Journal*, Barbara Hoffert wrote, □As always, Phillips's poems breathe quietude, but despite the wintry tone he seems ready for a reckoning, facing up to a traitorous world . . . and wrestling politely with God. . . . The results are polished and penetrating.□ Robert Phillips (no relation to the poet) wrote in his review of the book in the *Hudson Review*, □His poetry has been called erotic, yet somehow reserved, reminiscent of the gentlemanliness of older [W. H.] Auden and younger [James] Merrill.□ He finishes the review by noting, □I would quote, but his best stanzas invariably are run-on, long or complicated, so I'll pass. Just buy the book.□

Donna Seaman, the reviewer for *Booklist*, called *The Rest of Love* a □rarified and metaphysical collection, one that features [Phillips's] signature stark landscapes and brooding eroticism.□ She went on to note that □Phillips' restrained and abstract lyrics are elegant, enigmatic, and electric, provocative meditations on and enactments of what is 'a human need, / to give to shapelessness / a form.'□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at two colleges in Illinois. In this essay, he examines the implications of the poem's title.

Phillips's poem □All It Takes□ does what good poetry generally aims to do, in that it raises provocative questions that it cannot pretend to answer. The poem does have a point to make, which is something that even a casual reader should be able to sense upon first encountering it, but it does not lay out its case in a direct, linear fashion. The poem makes readers take responsibility for piecing its various elements together: to decide, after thinking it through for a while, which combination of the elements might offer the most meaningful interpretation.

This method of engaging the reader's imagination, of making readers do a significant amount of the work in untangling the complex issues being explored, is what poetry can do best. Some of Phillips's images in □All It Takes□ seem to divert from his central themes, and others are situated to yank the poem's train of thought abruptly in a new direction; these are the sorts of difficulties that readers can either reject or choose to absorb. Phillips writes with such reassuring authority, though, that most readers will keep faith and follow the uneven patches into new directions of inquiry. Rather than throwing the poem into confusion, the introduction of new elements serves to show that the issues under discussion are much larger than they may at first seem.

The poem is so complex, in fact, that it would be easy to overlook its most compelling, understated, mystery: that of the title. It has a familiarity, directness, and simplicity that would be more expected of the title of a mediocre coming-of-age comedy at the mall multiplex than in a delicate artwork. Because the phrase □all it takes□ is a standard idiom in American English, readers might give in to the impulse to accept it without curiosity. But as a poem title it deserves interrogation: just what is the poem implying actually *is* □all it takes?□ What is □it?□ What is □all?□ Because Phillips develops his poem's ideas in an indirect way, there is no clear answer to any of these questions.

The most direct answer to the question of what □it□ refers to in the title would be to say that it is the □force□ mentioned in the poem's first line. Phillips follows this primary idea with a list of variants on the same idea over the course of the first three stanzas: generosity, fear, dampness, and so on. This is, in fact, only a list and does not even pretend to be any sort of explanation. There is not even a verb in the poem until □shine,□ at the start of stanza 4.

One way of interpreting this pattern would be to think that the items on this three-stanza list do not need a verb because they are all direct objects, all meant to finish off the open-ended statement □All it takes is . . .□ What makes this explanation unlikely is that there are quite a few elements listed throughout the first three stanzas. The word □all□ is used in the title in the dismissive sense of □simply□ or □merely□; this list (force, generosity, updraft, things invisible, dampness) seems a little long to be casually

shrugged off. This is so unless the title is meant to be ironic; it is not impossible, but there is nothing else in the poem to indicate an ironic tone.

Moreover, when the poem continues, from the fourth stanza on, it introduces new elements that lead the inquiry into different directions. Readers are left to wonder, as each new element pops up, whether *this* will be □all it takes.□ Dead center in the poem, in the middle of the middle stanza, there is an idea that sounds as if it should be a likely candidate. Phillips phrases the line about the *ability* to believe preceding the *need* to believe in such a commanding way that it would be difficult to see it as anything but a grand, universal truth. It takes no stretch of the imagination to believe that this idea is placed centrally for a reason: that the rest of the poem is built around it, echoing in both directions. If the ability to believe is □all it takes,□ then the rest□what comes before and after it□is extra.

While this could easily be the case, it fails to explain many of the poem's intriguing aspects. What, for example, does betrayal have to do with the ability to believe? Clearly, this is an important concept, at least important enough to have the word □betrayed□ used twice, mournfully, in the second stanza. Another and similarly perplexing verbal element is the way in which Phillips writes about the thorns on a wintry vine. □I am no less grateful for the berries than for the thorns□ implies that readers might find this unusual, as if the ordinary presumption would be that the speaker should be more grateful for the thorns. But that would not, in fact, be the natural expectation. Both the □thorn□ issue and the □betrayed□ issue have a negative tone that is not conveyed in the line about having the ability to believe.

The poem makes one more notable detour in its explanation of Greek and Roman gods. Leaving aside the rich implications of the actual gods and their personalities, which it would take a classicist like Phillips to fully appreciate, the poem offers enough to consider just within its words alone. The god of love is said to be wild, the god of fidelity tame. The message, in the context of this particular poem, is that love is the greater mystery and therefore needs more activity of a wider range in order to make itself known. Fidelity, on the other hand, not needing such a showy god to define it, must be more innately familiar.

Focusing on this part of the poem alone, one can at least make a guess at what □it□ means in the title: life, or serenity, or perhaps enlightenment. Unfortunately, what is even more obscure is what □it takes□: it could take a lot of activity, as love requires, or just a little, like fidelity. Of course, when the title might be interpreted as meaning one thing or its exact opposite, then it does not really have meaning at all.

Whatever this poem's title refers to, it ends with death. It has two things to say about death in the last stanza: one is as enigmatic as anything that comes in the preceding six stanzas and one so commonplace that it feels like the right ending, but for the wrong poem. The directive to □Make / death the one whose eyes are lidless□ is typical of Phillips's poetry, insinuating an issue into the poem as if it has already been the subject of the discussion, though it has not: no □one□ or □another□ has previously been introduced. In the case of death's being □one,□ the □other□ would have to be life. The

poem tells readers to turn the tables, implying that life is normally the one with lidless eyes. The new order of things, prescribed by the poem, is that death should be made to be always vigilant. Therefore, if death's eyes are to become lidless, life is granted eyelids and the ability to close them, to relax its guard now and then.

At last, in a poem of such intensity, some element of acceptance is introduced. This casual acceptance corresponds with the □all□ of the title, setting some limit. Life should be relaxed and let its eyes droop, while the advice of the title, telling readers what it takes, is relaxed by the simple □all.□ In each case, the poem warns to not make things any more complex than they need to be.

Philosophically, then, the poem is ultimately coherent. It deals with the ways actions and emotions become manifest through the physical world; how complex emotions require complex systems□the □wild□ gods□to frame them in the mind; and how life should be more than looking for signs, leaving such unblinking vigilance for after death. In its final lines, though, □All It Takes□ shifts to addressing its audience in a second-person voice, making a pronouncement of death that is not really a major point of the poem. This adds even more complexity to its meaning than any of the shifts in tone and subject matter that came before.

The phrases □you are leaving□ and □you have crossed the water□ both imply the finality of death, which is directly referred to at the start of the last stanza. In going from a command about how to treat death (□*make* / death . . .□) to the observation that death has already come for the □you,□ Phillips gives the last line a finality that makes the poem feel complete, but he does so at the expense of what has led up to that point. The image of □crossing the water□ is eternal, and it has a beautifully severe tone, but its very finality and severity are at odds with the lively, unblinking inquiry into the nature of life that has come before. It is almost as if the poem, having pondered substantial ideas throughout its seven stanzas, comes to a convenient but inconclusive end by telling readers not to think about all that has been discussed, because it is already too late. In this case, □all it takes□ would be resignation, a stoic acceptance of a fate that could not be avoided anyway.

It would be nice if a poem could provide a magic, universal understanding of everything□everything!□and what to do about it. Poems cannot, though: any poem that pretends to explain the whole world in a few stanzas is either terribly naive or cynically insincere. Phillips is neither. With the title □All It Takes,□ he is being ironic, using the title's simplicity to show off the poem's winding complexity. The main point of this title is to prove its opposite: whatever □it□ is, whatever it □takes,□ no poem will ever be able to tell its readers □all.□

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on □All It Takes,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

Phillips and C. D. Wright were recorded reading their poems in the Montpelier Room of the Library of Congress, December 11, 1997. An audiocassette recording of the event is on file at the Library of Congress.

The Library of Congress also holds another recording of a reading, this one given in 1998 in the Montpelier Room, by Phillips and Carol Muske-Dukes, who were both Witter Bynner Fellows.

Washington University in St. Louis maintains a website at www.news-info.wustl.edu/sb/page/normal/143.html that gives a thorough overview of Phillips's career and the many honors awarded him.

Topics for Further Study

This poem starts out describing how invisible things are revealed through their association with gestures. Write a brief sketch that will convey some human situation without any dialogue. As an observer, try to explain the situation in as much detail as possible.

Using three-line stanzas, as Phillips does, write an explanation of Einstein's theory of relativity, which explains the connection between invisible energy and visible mass.

The poem refers to the thorns on a berry bush and makes the observation that they □are / meant, I think, to help.□ Research the actual theories that botanists have about the development of thorns on different kinds of plants and the functions of the thorns. Make a chart showing the variations in nature.

Phillips mentions how love and fidelity are explored in Greek and Roman mythology. Choose the mythology of another culture and explain at least two of that culture's myths about either love or fidelity.

What Do I Read Next?

By his third volume of poems, *From the Devotions* (2002), Phillips was already recognized as a strong force in American poetry. This volume focuses on the correlation between body and spirit, which was then becoming a major theme in Phllips's work. Particularly representative of his work at the time is the title poem from this collection.

Phillips explores theories about poetry, nature, and writing in a more linear fashion than he does in his poems with the essay collection *Coin of the Realm: Essays on the Art and Life of Poetry* (2004), published by Graywolf Press.

The poetry of Brigit Pegeen Kelly has been compared to Phillips's in the way that it combines myth and observation to bring to life a rich spiritual world. Kelly's *The Orchard* (2004) is narrated from the perspective of an observer, describing human emotion and suffering rather than living it.

One of the most influential books of the twentieth century was Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1888), a study of comparative myths and legends. Although it is more focused on distinctions between □civilized□ and □primitive□ societies than modern studies find acceptable, Frazer's book is still an influential overview of how civilizations around the world have approached ideas such as love and fidelity. *The Golden Bough* was first published as a two-volume set but was reedited in 1922 to the volume that is still in print.

Further Study

Blacker, Mary Rose, *Flora Domestica: A History of British Flower Arranging, 1500-1930*, Harry N. Abrams, 2000.

When Phillips uses the metaphor of an arrangement of cut flowers, he implies a broad history of domestic floral arrangement. Unlike the many books about the subject that focus on advice, Blacker, who was with Britain's National Trust for thirty years, uses the subject of handling flowers as a basis for sociological study.

Daniélou, Alain, *Gods of Love and Ecstasy: The Traditions of Shiva and Dionysus*, Inner Traditions International, 1992.

There are several gods that can qualify as the □love□ god mentioned in this poem. Daniélou's book examines the concept of a god of love across Western and Indian traditions.

Hilfrich, Karen, □Symbolic Changes: An Interview with Carl Phillips,□ in *Lambda Book Report*, Vol. 6, No. 9, April 1998, p. 15.

This interview, conducted when Phillips had been publishing poetry for just a few years, is noteworthy in the way the conversation veers from artistic theory to personal information to thoughts on the state of poetry in general.

Rich, Adrienne, □Format and Form,□ in *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative and Tradition*, Storyline Press, 1999, pp. 1-7.

Rich, one of the most respected of contemporary American poets, examines the general concept of form, as opposed to free verse. Readers who are interested in Phillips's mix of the casual and the structured should take note.

Bibliography

Hoffert, Barbara, Review of *The Rest of Love*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 128, No. 18, November 1, 2003, p. 87.

Phillips, Carl, *The Rest of Love*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004, p. 21.

Phillips, Robert, "Light and Dark," in *Hudson Review*, Vol. 57, No. 3, Autumn 2004, pp. 519-22.

Review of *In the Blood*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 239, No. 46, October 19, 1992, p. 72.

Seaman, Donna, "New Works by African American Poets," in *Booklist*, Vol. 100, No. 12, February 15, 2004, p. 1026.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

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

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

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.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

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:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535