Answers to Letters Study Guide

Answers to Letters by Tomas Tranströmer

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Most critics would agree that Tomas Tranströmer is Sweden's most important poet since World War II. He has been associated with a variety of literary movements, lived through periods of enormous change in the world of poetry, and published poems with great diversity in form and content. Throughout his life, however, Tranströmer has published elegant and thoughtful poetry that explores the unconscious and challenges the reader's conception of the world, such as "Svar på brev" ("Answers to Letters"), from the collection *Det Vilda Torget* (*The Wild Market-Square*). Beginning with the discovery of a letter that was delivered twenty-six years earlier, the poem is a journey through the labyrinth of time, memory, and the past. It uses striking, often dream-like, comparisons and a sophisticated prose style to dramatize a journey of self-discovery.

The "self," or the identity of the poem's speaker and the object of this journey, is an elusive element in "Answers to Letters," partly because it is tied to both unconscious and conscious worlds. Tranströmer, an eminent psychologist in Sweden, is as interested in the workings of the unconscious self as he is in the function and purpose of poetry. The mature and profound meditation on these ideas leaves the reader with a poem that is characteristic of the eminent international poet highly regarded in the United States since the American poet Robert Bly began translating his material in the 1960s. He is now commonly accepted as a master in his native Sweden. "Answers to Letters," which was originally published in Stockholm in 1983, is available in Robin Fulton's English translation, *New Collected Poems*, published by Bloodaxe Books in 1997.

Author Biography

Born in Stockholm, Sweden, on April 15, 1931, Tranströmer grew up with his mother, a primary school teacher, and his maternal grandfather, a ship's pilot. He attended high school during Sweden's postwar boom years, and after his obligatory military service, he spent eight years traveling and studying a variety of subjects at the University of Stockholm. In 1958, Tranströmer married Monica Blach and began working as a psychologist in Stockholm until, in 1960, he took a job as a psychologist in residence at an institution for juvenile delinquents near the city of Linköping.

By this time Tranströmer had published *17 dikter* (*17 Poems*, 1954), which anthologized a selection of poetry written in his late teens and early twenties, and *Hemligheter på vägen* (*Secrets on the Way*), which broadened Tranströmer's poetic style and revealed some of the experience he gathered while traveling in Europe and Africa. During the 1960s, the poet came under the attack of certain Swedish critics, but his reputation began to grow internationally. Tranströmer became particularly successful in the United States, partly due to his friendship and collaboration with the American poet Robert Bly, a relationship that has continued for over forty years. Bly has long been one of the most influential translators of Tranströmer's poems into English, although Robin Fulton's translation of the complete works has become a standard text.

While continuing to publish collections of poetry throughout the 1970s and 1980s, including *Östersjöar* (*Baltics*, 1974) and *Det Vilda Torget* (*The Wild Market-Square*, 1983), Tranströmer also furthered his career as a psychologist in Västerås, Sweden. He suffered a stroke resulting in an inability to talk in November of 1990, but he was writing again soon enough to publish his autobiography, *Minnena ser mig* (*Memories Look at Me*) in 1993. Since then he has published a book entitled *Sorgegondolen* (*The Sad Gondola*, 1997), his eleventh collection of poetry. Tranströmer has received numerous literary awards, including the Neustadt International Prize for Literature 1990.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

Beginning directly on the left margin, without the indentations of the other five stanzas, stanza one is set apart from the rest of the poem. Tranströmer may be implying that the first lines are an introductory statement, or the subsequent indentations may be meant to underscore the fact that the letter the speaker finds at the bottom of his desk drawer is "breathing." In any case, the two sentences of the first stanza reveal a speaker, or a character that narrates the poem, who has "come across" a letter that arrived twenty-six years previously. The phrase "come across" does not imply any urgency or action; it is the letter itself that "arrives," "in panic" and still breathing after twenty-six years, like a ghost to haunt the speaker. The speaker's passivity, and his inability to respond to his past or to major questions that are breathing and panicking, will be an important theme in the following stanzas.

Stanza 2

The second stanza's description of a house with five windows, all of them looking out to a clear and still day except the one revealing a "black sky, thunder and storm," is a somewhat mysterious image, since this would never be the case in an actual house. In fact, Tranströmer seems to be implying that this house is an abstract metaphor as opposed to a real place; "a house" instead of "my house" or "the house" signifies that the speaker is speaking in a general or unspecific way. Also, a reader might at first picture a house with four windows, or at least four views, one on each side. A fifth window with a view that is entirely different from the others may signify something outside the normal area of perception.

The two-word sentence "The letter," which stands alone as if to emphasize its striking presence, connects the fifth window and the black storm to whatever it is that the letter represents. The fact that it is related to an obscure, stormy past may suggest that the letter contains questions that have haunted the speaker for a long time. And since the letter seems to represent some kind of living, breathing past, it may be that the letter has suddenly opened up a window to the past for the speaker and allowed him, or forced him, to confront something that he is unable to answer.

Stanza 3

Stanza three begins by discussing time, observing that an "abyss" can occur between two days, but many years can pass in a very short time. This "abyss" refers, in part, to sleep, which can be a dreamland of an undefined amount of time and occur on an entirely different plane of existence. The poem "Dream Seminar," which comes shortly after "Answers to Letters" in *The Wild Marketplace*, expands on the idea that dreams can inhabit a separate and timeless world related to the subconscious. This is one

reason that time is like a "labyrinth"; the past, subconscious memories, and major unanswered questions about life continue to haunt and confuse people until it seems that they are struggling through a previous passage of the maze of life.

It is also significant that the speaker compares time to a labyrinth because it suggests that he desperately wants to find a way out of time and to escape. Death is the obvious way to fully escape from time, and Tranströmer will continue to be interested in the idea of death later in this poem, but there is also the possibility of escape from normality that was represented by the "fifth window" of stanza two. There is a sense in which the speaker might need to confront "the hurrying steps and the voices" of the past, which appear to be more like haunting ghosts than fond memories, but are nevertheless intriguing keys to the speaker's identity. The speaker may desire to find the other self that is "walking past there on the other side," and answer the letter that is haunting him.

Stanza 4

The speaker's question of whether he ever answered the letter, and the fact that he cannot remember, emphasizes the uncertainty and stormy panic of the past and suggests that the letter may even be unanswerable. As if to stress that this is a vast problem and confusion, Tranströmer then provides the somewhat confusing image, "The countless thresholds of the sea went on migrating." "Thresholds" denotes entrances to the sea, or perhaps beaches, but it is difficult to imagine how they might migrate; perhaps the poet intends to evoke an image of the seas changing shape over hundreds or thousands of years of geological time. In any case, this phrase also has a double meaning related to the fifth window of stanza two and the "abyss" of time in stanza three. The threshold of the sea is a repetition, in a different form, of the previous imagery of the window and the entrance into the abyss of the past, and it is important to note that the speaker's access into this world of unanswered questions is constantly "migrating" and changing.

Stanza four's final sentence is another image of the progression of time, and again the reader should notice that time is not a straight line. Like a toad on wet grass, each heartbeat and each second leaps in a haphazard and even impulsive path, without a clear direction. What does seem true about the pattern of time is that each second is tied exactly to each heartbeat, as if an individual person's experience of time determines the objective reality of seconds, days, and years. Tranströmer highlights this contradiction between objective time and the individual whim by combining the abstract and general image of "the heart," as opposed to "my heart," "leaping from second to second" with the very specific image of "the toad in the wet grass of an August night."

Stanza 5

By changing the image of one letter to "unanswered letters pil[ing] up," and associating them with stormy weather that takes the shine out of sunbeams, the poet reinforces the idea that the letters are somehow haunting him and reminding him of things that are

unresolved. The third sentence, "One day I will answer," stands out as a declaration, but it is not an immediate resolution, and the idea that the speaker will not be able to do so until he dies reinforces the idea that he is unable to confront the memories and questions in the letter or letters.

However, the next sentence, which suggests that the speaker may be able to respond or confront his past once he is able to "find myself again," is more hopeful. Tranströmer is explicitly confronting his reader with the idea that the speaker must enter an obscure labyrinth of his time in order to find his identity. The speaker cannot "find [him]self," or know who he really is, while looking out one of the four windows from stanza two that reveal the "clear and still" daylight. He must enter the world of the panicked, breathing letter that is very far away from "here," by which the speaker presumably means his home and his everyday life.

The final two sentences of the poem visualize a specific image of the speaker "finding himself again" and answering the letters from his past. The speaker suddenly envisions the place where he can concentrate and find his identity: "newly arrived, in the big city, on 125th street" amongst garbage blowing around in the wind. This location, which is very specific in the sense that it is so carefully and precisely described but simultaneously quite formless since the speaker is walking "in the wind," is likely to refer to New York City. The 125th street of Harlem, New York, an area known in the twentieth century for its dominant African American population, is quite well known because it is the location of the Apollo Theater, where many African American celebrities have begun their careers.

The tension between specificity, or identity, and formlessness continues in the final sentence of the poem. Its emphasis, which Tranströmer underscores with diction, or word choices, like "stray off," "vanish," and "endless mass," seems to be on the speaker's disappearance into obscurity. The sense of formlessness is also emphasized by the use of sentence fragments in the last four sentences. Yet the phrase "capital T" is vital to the balance between formlessness and fixed identity in the closing line of the poem; it immediately connects the speaker to the poet's identity, since a "T" begins Tranströmer's first and last names, and it stands out strongly as a contradiction to the "endless mass." The reader is left unsure whether the process of answering letters, turning to the past, and entering the labyrinth of time, will allow the speaker to find his identity or wash him away into obscurity.

Themes

Time, Memory, and the Past

Many of Tranströmer's central thematic concerns in "Answers to Letters" are related to time. This is most explicit in the third stanza and its description of the speaker's experience of the labyrinth of time, but each stanza refers to time in some manner, often in connection to the speaker's memory and past represented by the rediscovered letter. Stanza one introduces the theme of an object representing something twenty-six years in the past that is still breathing and panicking; stanza two seems to refer to some obscure and cloudy version of time outside its "fifth window"; stanza four describes time in unique visual terms emphasizing that it does not run in a straight line; and stanza five envisions the speaker in a contradiction between a vague point in time in the future ("one day"), and the specific moment of walking in the wind of 125th street.

Like the speaker's letter, which can be a source of meaning and promise but also a cause for fear and panic, time plays a somewhat contradictory role in the poem. There is a strong sense throughout the poem that time is haunting the speaker, and that time is an evil labyrinth or a black and cloudy storm from which he desperately wants to escape into the sunbeams and clear weather. Yet the speaker also seems to want to confront the strange phenomenon of time, to find the "self" walking past him on the other side of the wall in time's labyrinth. He wants to answer the unanswered letters from the past and face the questions they pose, and he insists that he will confront the stormy past when, in the last stanza, he says, "One day I will answer." Tranströmer seems to be commenting, therefore, on the nature of time itself; the speaker needs to escape from time in order to find himself, but he can only experience his "self" and find an identity within the structure of time.

Stanza five's solution to this problem, which consists of the speaker's proposal to answer the letters when he is dead "and can at last concentrate," or at least "far away from here so I can find myself again," is quite contradictory. This process seems to involve straying off and "vanish[ing] in the crowd," another example of escaping from time, while simultaneously requiring a specific point in time, when he is "newly arrived" in the big city. Concluding the poem with the image of a fixed point in an "endless mass," or capital "T" in an infinite amount of text, Tranströmer highlights the contradiction between being within and without time. Although one letter is, in a sense, meaningless in an endless string of letters, it is still a unique and individual point in time, even if the same letter will be repeated over and over again. The "answers to letters" are only possible at a particular point in time, but the answers are also only possible when the speaker has stepped outside of time and can see the whole picture.

Identity

"Answers to Letters" is, in part, a journey of self-discovery. This journey begins as soon as the letter arrives, but it is not explicit until, in the third stanza, the speaker discusses hearing "yourself" on the other side of a wall in time's labyrinth; here it becomes clear that the speaker is searching for his own identity, not for another person who wrote the letter. The journey to find the "self" then builds until it reaches the climax in the line: "Or at least so far away from here that I can find myself again." This sentence, which ties directly back to the initial image of a letter delivered twenty-six years ago yet "in panic" and "still breathing," suggests that Tranströmer sees a paradox in the search for the self. While the speaker needs to be close enough to understand the immediate and specific aspects of his identity, he also needs to remain far enough away to see the permanent and timeless essence of his selfhood. The poet may be suggesting that identity must always consist of a paradoxical combination of the timeless, permanent self, and the extremely specific, localized, and individual details that cannot describe anyone else.

The Unconscious

The search for identity (see above) is closely related, for Tranströmer, to the workings of the unconscious and conscious mind. The "fifth window" of stanza two, which is likely to be a reference to the unconscious mind, emphasizes that the unconscious self must relate and interact with the conscious self. While the unconscious self is a timeless and even vague or illogical phenomenon, the conscious self is located in a very specific timeframe and series of actions. A psychologist with a long-standing interest in the interaction between the unconscious and conscious worlds, Tranströmer is interested in expressing the ways in which these two worlds must combine, if their combination is possible, in order to form a whole and complete self, or an identity.

Style

Prose Poetry

"Answers to Letters" is a prose poem in five stanzas, which means that it consists of five sections, in this case much like paragraphs, with lines of text that are not intended to have specific line breaks. The poem, therefore, reads almost like a very short story; it does not require its reader to pause over each line or sound out a specific "meter," or sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables. Tranströmer maintains a careful rhythm of language, employs poetic techniques such as repetition, and balances each word carefully with those around it. But, because of the prose appearance of the text itself, each stanza appears to be a sort of independent thought written in the same prose style as one might use to answer a letter.

Metaphor and Simile

Tranströmer frequently uses the comparative devices of metaphor and simile, both of which are figures of speech that suggest a similarity between two objects or actions (although a simile is characterized by the use of the words "as" or "like"). As many critics have suggested, Tranströmer's metaphors and similes do not merely serve as descriptive tools; they are often used to transform the reader's experience of reality. They involve rapid shifts to ideas that may seem unrelated to the "tenor," or the original source of the comparison.

This technique of liberal association, which often seems illogical, is an element of Tranströmer's poetry that some critics have associated with Surrealism. Poets whom Tranströmer admired and by whom he was influenced, the French Surrealists placed a great deal of emphasis on the workings of unconscious thought, and the melding of conscious and unconscious worlds. Tranströmer, whose interest in the unconscious mind connects to his lifelong career as a psychologist, may have similar aims when he employs a unique spectrum of freely associated comparisons in "Answers to Letters."

Historical Context

Sweden in the Early 1980s

Swedish politics were preoccupied with questioning the policy of neutrality, which had been in place since World War II, after a Soviet submarine ran aground near a Swedish naval base in 1981. The early 1980s in Sweden were also marked by the reelection of the socialist Social Democratic Party, which had been in power for forty-four years when a coalition of non-socialist parties won the election of 1976. An economic downturn led to a Social Democrat victory in 1982, and a return to the policies of the Swedish "welfare" state, which places a large emphasis on redistribution of wealth and an extensive network of social services. Schools, universities, health care, pensions, and various economic support schemes in Sweden were funded entirely through taxation.

Swedish Poetry after World War II

Until the mid-1960s, Swedish poetry was predominantly associated with high modernism and "formalism," or poetry that placed an emphasis on structure and style as opposed to content. T. S. Eliot was one of the most influential critics and poets to espouse this view and, although it was rapidly going out of fashion in the years following World War II, it remained popular in Sweden for some years. By the 1960s, however, a younger generation of poets was emerging with a tendency to focus on political content and a directly engaging style. As Joanna Bankier writes in her literary biography of Tranströmer, "Swedish writers and poets coming of age in the 1960s began to feel that aesthetic form and aesthetic pleasure might be obstacles to empathy, hindrances evoking indecency in the face of human suffering."

These writers, as Bankier observes, disdained the distanced and measured tone, which they associated with writers of the previous generation. The divide between formalism and politicized or "raw" poetry grew less urgent during the 1970s, but traces of these two aesthetic approaches remained an important issue amongst Swedish poets. Tranströmer himself had been, perhaps unfairly, associated with the formalists and condemned by many in the younger generation. By the time *The Wild Market-Square* was published in 1983, however, it was generally acknowledged that he had been engaged in numerous experiments in form since the 1960s.

Surrealism

The artistic movement known as Surrealism was founded by the French poet and critic André Breton in the 1920s. Surrealism was heavily influenced by the preceding movement of Dadaism, which stressed irrationality and anarchy, and both movements were a reaction against the rationalistic European culture that, some artists believed, led to the horrors of World War I. But Surrealism is unique in its emphasis on positive expression, unconscious thought, and the melding of the unconscious and conscious

worlds. Breton and other Surrealist poets became known for free-association and a startling psychological, illogical thought process.

Aside from the poets who were working directly under Breton's Surrealist manifesto, Surrealist thought had a wide-ranging influence in literature, art, theater, and film. It has been linked to Samuel Beckett and the Theater of the Absurd as well as with the stream-of-consciousness writing technique practiced by James Joyce and others. Although he has also been associated with "formalism," Tranströmer is known to have an interest in Surrealism and his poetry often exhibits some of the leaps of unconscious association for which Surrealists became known.

Critical Overview

Swedish critics initially associated Tranströmer with the high modernist "formalist" tradition characteristic of his generation. The poet never strictly conformed to this description; his work changed drastically over time, he engaged in numerous experiments in form, and many critics, including Urban Torhamn, have acknowledged his connection to the Surrealist movement. But Tranströmer was nevertheless associated with formalism, particularly when, in the 1960s, a young and radical generation were fiercely advocating a politicized and direct poetic style. As Joanna Bankier notes in her *Dictionary of Literary Biography* entry on the poet, during this time of change, "critics took issue with Tranströmer's craftsmanship and formal restraint."

This stigma remained with Tranströmer for many years, although in the United States, due particularly to Robert Bly's championing, he retained a prestigious reputation as an innovative and liberal poet. Describing why the younger Swedish generation disavowed Tranströmer's style, Bly writes in his 1990 article "Tomas Tranströmer and 'The Memory'":

He likes this "suspension," where objects float in a point of view that cannot be identified as "Marxist" or "conservative," right or left. During the sixties many critics in Sweden demanded that each poet commit himself or herself to a Marxist view, or at least concede that documentaries are the only socially useful form of art.

As the trend that began with the generation of the 1960s grew less pronounced, however, Swedish critics began once again to consider Tranströmer a unique master. Bankier describes the recent criticism of the poet as wide-ranging, often treating his work as a "consideration of his language or an intertextual examination." "Answers to Letters" has received little individual critical attention, but the discussions of *The Wild Market-Square* or Tranströmer's work as a whole are often highly applicable, such as Gary Lenhart's description of how "Tomas Tranströmer's poems occupy 'the slot between waking and sleep,'" in his article "Hard Edge Fog."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is a freelance writer with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell discusses the journey of self-discovery in "Answers to Letters," arguing that the speaker uses the poem to answer the letters of his past and define who he is.

The central metaphors in Tranströmer's poem are the letters that the speaker desires to answer, from the initial letter that arrived twenty-six years before to the "unanswered letters" that "pile up" in the final stanza, but it is not entirely clear what these metaphors represent. They could, in part, be meant to signify a friend or lover, or the memory of such a person who has been lost or left behind. Or, given the fact that the initial letter is "in panic" and the speaker seems anxious to clear the clouds associated with the letters, Tranströmer may be implying that the letters signify unanswered questions about the world that have reemerged to haunt the speaker. Perhaps this is why they have become so pressing and confusing as to "make the sunbeams lusterless."

But there is also a sense in which the letters are representations of the speaker's very personal past, or artifacts of who he used to be. Particularly when he uses the phrase, "you can hear yourself walking past there," while discussing the "labyrinth" of time, Tranströmer appears to be implying that the letters should be understood as messages from himself, as if his past self is communicating with his present self. Indeed, it becomes particularly clear in the final sentences of the poem that the letters, which the speaker can only answer once he "can find [him]self again," are closely associated with his identity. The conflict for the speaker is one of answering who he is, and the phrase "Answers to Letters" may refer to his need to declare his selfhood and "answer" himself.

For the speaker, the two main aspects of this process are "find[ing] myself," and declaring this identity in the form of a poem. Neither of these goals are particularly easy, and it becomes clear in "Answers to Letters" that both are precarious and inexact processes. Nevertheless, the poem both acknowledges the complexity of such a journey of self-discovery and manages to formulate an answer to the speaker's persistent questions. By the end of the poem, it becomes clear that although his identity comes very close to vanishing altogether into something that he cannot understand, Tranströmer has accomplished this unique and individual journey, and left behind a poem that is itself a visionary declaration of his selfhood.

The first element of the poem's theme of identity is the speaker's search for the diverse elements of his "self." Tranströmer dramatizes this journey with a number of careful poetic techniques, but perhaps the most important of these is the way in which he weaves together the past and present, the specific and the general, in order to display the contradictory nature of identity and suit the imagery of the poem to the story it tells. "Answers to Letters" describes a series of events that move closer to a specific point, such as "125th Street" or "the toad in the wet grass of an August night," but simultaneously seem to move further away from anything specific, such as "countless thresholds of the sea" and "the endless mass of the text." This relationship between the

focused, specific, and rational, and the general, timeless, and irrational, is the key stylistic feature the poet uses to visualize and express the process of introspection. Examining it closely reveals some of Tranströmer's most important ambitions in the poem.

The paradox between the specific and the timeless is so appropriate for representing the process of self-discovery because, as Tranströmer recognizes, identity is divided between these two extremes. Each person's "self" is comprised of the particular actions and events of a lifetime, or everything that might fit into a biography, as well as the unique and permanent world of inner thoughts that make up what some would call a "spirit." It is only in the combination of these two aspects that the speaker seems to have the chance to discover his identity, which is why Tranströmer insists on combining paradoxical images in order to envision the process of self-declaration. "Answers to Letters" does not simply point out that the self has these two elements; it probes the possibility of combining them into something coherent within the structure and limits of the discipline of psychology.

In his essay "Hard Edge Fog," Gary Lenhart describes the "vocabulary of contraries" in Tranströmer's poetry as a "landscape" that is "at once tangible and mysterious. Despite the recurring Baltic fog, the objects in his dreams have sharp edges and a particular insistence." Critics such as Lenhart and Robert Bly have connected this poetic style, which is readily apparent in "Answers to Letters," to Tranströmer's interest in the relationship between the unconscious and conscious worlds. When the "thunder and storm" of the fifth window occurs at the same time as the "day shines clear and still" in the other four windows, or the "countless thresholds of the sea" go on "migrating" at the same time as the location is fixed to the leaps of a toad on an August night, it is clear that the unfathomable, endless, and obscure world of the unconscious is closely intertwined with the clear, exact, and ordered world of the conscious.

The paradoxes of the final stanza make it particularly clear that these worlds need to combine in order for the speaker to find what he thinks of as his "self." His identity is incomplete without acknowledging the vast world of his unconscious, but as soon as he turns to face the fifth window and confront this part of his self, the speaker seems in danger of "vanish[ing] in the crowd" altogether. Because the unconscious world is timeless and unfixed, a limitless landscape of dreams, the brief meeting of unconscious and conscious selves threatens to result in an "endless mass of text," leaving the speaker without the coherent self-understanding he seeks. The idea that the speaker can only answer the letters when he is "dead and can at last concentrate" emphasizes this problem and highlights the additional paradox that the speaker cannot genuinely find his identity until he no longer physically exists, when he is an entirely fixed and lifeless subject.

Nevertheless, the speaker qualifies this statement with the sentence, "Or at least so far away from here that I can find myself again," which suggests a more successful outcome in the struggle to reconcile his conscious and unconscious worlds. The sentences that follow this one form a more specific vision of this reconciliation, envisioning the very specific location of 125th Street's "wind on the street of dancing

garbage" and the paradox of "a capital T in the endless mass of the text." The fact that this "endless mass of text" is the final image of the poem reinforces the possibility that the speaker has been lost in the faraway realm of the unconscious into which he has journeyed, but the capital "T" is a powerful balance to this threat. Since "T" is the first letter of Tranströmer's first and last names, it is a key sign of hope that the speaker, and the poet, have reached the essence of the self.

The merging of the narrative voice of the poem and the poet himself is not a subtle trick or quirky touch in the final line; it is central to the search for identity in "Answers to Letters." By claiming explicitly that he is the identity in question, Tranströmer is urging the reader to regard the poem as more than a mere dramatization of a fictional search for selfhood. The "capital T" is a sign that the poem is a self-conscious declaration that consists of, as its title suggests, "answers" to the poet's own "letters," or unanswered questions and memories from his past. In this sense, the entire prose poem, or the individual stanzas of indented prose themselves, might be considered "answers" to the past and declarations of identity.

Like much of the poetry in *The Wild Market-Square*, Tranströmer allows a vision or possibility such as this declaration of selfhood to remain floating in the reader's mind. He does not insist upon strictly fixing his meaning, but allows the stanzas to remain partly in his own very personal world of meaning and partly in the more general and understandable form of answers to the vague past. This allows the reader some access into Tranströmer's theories of the melding of unconscious and conscious worlds, and it establishes an important commentary on the ambiguous and contrary nature of identity. But, perhaps more importantly, it also offers a visionary glimpse into the poet's extremely unique and personal understanding of himself.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on "Answers to Letters," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Tranströmer has had a lifelong interest in psychology, and he has worked for many years as a psychologist in Västerås, Sweden. How does "Answers to Letters" relate to the field of psychology? Can you find other examples of poems that reflect themes related to psychology in *The Wild Market-Square* in other collections of Tranströmer's poetry? How do these poems bring out psychological ideas and how do psychological theories improve or change your understanding of them? Do some research into the theories of famous twentieth-century psychologists such as Sigmund Freud or Carl Jung in order to construct your answer.

Robert Bly is Tranströmer's friend and chief advocate in the United States. Read some of Bly's poetry, such as *This Tree Will Be Here for a Thousand Years* (1979), and discuss the similarities and differences between Bly's and Tranströmer's poetry. Choose a poem of Bly's to compare in depth with "Answers to Letters," taking into account poetic technique and approaches to similar themes. Or, after reading some of Bly's nonfiction essays and criticism in addition to selections of his poetry, explain why you think Bly might have developed such an interest in Tranströmer's work.

One of the most important Swedish artists since World War II is the filmmaker Ingmar Bergman. Watch Bergman's film *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), as well as some of his earlier classics such as *The Seventh Seal* (1956). How do you think *Fanny and Alexander* relates to "Answers to Letters?" How does Bergman's style compare to Tranströmer's? How do you think each artist is suited to his medium? Compare the portrayal of Sweden in their works, as well as their common imagery and their explorations of psychology and the unconscious.

Tranströmer has published numerous collections of poetry over the years. Read some of his early material, some of his work during the 1960s and 1970s, and some of the other poems in *The Wild Market-Square*. How has his style changed over time? How have his techniques, themes, and subject matter changed, and what are some of the key ways in which his recent poetry is unique, innovative, and different? Discuss what makes "Answers to Letters" distinctive, and compare it to another poem that you think addresses similar issues.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: In Sweden, the environment and nuclear energy, along with questions over the Swedish policy of neutrality, are the major political issues of the day.

Today: Sweden is a member of the European Union (since 1995), but Swedish voters decline to join the common European currency in 2003, a vote that went ahead just days after the shocking assassination of Sweden's foreign minister. Like the assassination of the Swedish Prime Minister in 1986, investigators are unable to determine the motive of the killer.

1980s: In the United States, Ronald Reagan, a Republican and former actor, is president. The decade marks the advent of household computer technology and an atmosphere of economic conservatism.

Today: Republican George W. Bush is president of the United States, and the social agenda of the government is more conservative since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001.

1980s: The Social Democratic Party regains control in Sweden, and the country recovers from the economic downturn that marked the late 1970s. Sweden has a reputation as a country with one of the most extensive social service networks in the world.

Today: Sweden retains its extensive social service network and enjoys one of the highest standards of living in the world. The Swedish economy is growing faster than others in most of Western Europe.

What Do I Read Next?

Tranströmer's *New Collected Poems* (1997), translated by Robin Fulton, contains all of the poet's major collections. From the elegant verse and striking imagery of *17 Poems* to the diverse and challenging meditations in *The Wild Market-Square* (1983) and *The Sad Gondola* (1996), this book is the definitive source to explore after "Answers to Letters."

This Tree Will Be Here for a Thousand Years (1979) is a collection of poetry by Tranströmer's friend, translator, and enthusiast Robert Bly. Many of the poems in this volume, like "Answers to Letters," offer a visionary meditation on the duality of consciousness.

André Breton: Selected Works (2003), edited by Mark Polizzotti, is an excellent introduction to the poetry of the famous surrealist author André Breton, including helpful biographical information and important selections from his prose.

Robert Bly's *American Poetry: Wilderness and Domesticity* (1990) is a passionate work of nonfiction that articulates Bly's theory of poetry and justifies his long-standing attack on many of the poets popular with the university elite.

The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke (1989) provides an important body of work by the famous twentieth-century Austrian writer, whose brilliant poetry ranges from mystical to philosophical to historical.

Further Study

Balakian, Anna, *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute*, University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Balakian offers a rewarding insight into the movement that, many critics would argue, has significantly influenced Tranströmer's poetry.

Bly, Robert, *Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations*, Beacon, 1975.

Bly's theory of "leaping poetry" is a vital contribution to the critical understanding of Tranströmer and other post—World War II European poets popular in the United States.

Steene, Birgitta, "Vision and Reality in the Poetry of Tomas Tranströmer," in *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 37, 1965, pp. 236—44.

Steene offers a general analysis of Tranströmer's techniques and themes. Although it was written long before the publication of "Answers to Letters," her essay provides insights into some of the most important themes of the poem.

Tranströmer, Tomas, and Robert Bly, *Air Mail: Brev 1964—1990*, compiled by Torbjörn Schmidt, translated by Lars-Håkan Svensson, Bonnier, 2001.

This collection of letters charts the long-standing correspondence of Tranströmer and his friend, fellow poet, and advocate in the United States.

Bibliography

Bankier, Joanna, "Tomas Tranströmer," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 257, *Twentieth-Century Swedish Writers after World War II*, edited by Ann-Charlotte Gavel Adams, Gale, 2002, pp. 277—90.

Bly, Robert, "Tomas Tranströmer and 'The Memory,'" in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 64, No. 4, Autumn 1990, pp. 570—73.

Lenhart, Gary, "Hard Edge Fog," in the *American Book Review*, Vol. 9, No. 4, September—October 1987, p. 10.

Tranströmer, Tomas, "Answers to Letters," in *New Collected Poems*, translated by Robin Fulton, Bloodaxe Books, 1997, pp. 136—37.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Poetry for Students*.

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
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

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