An Anthem Study Guide

An Anthem by Sonia Sanchez

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Sonia Sanchez's poem "An Anthem" first appeared in 1987's *Under a Soprano Sky* and later was included in *Shake Loose My Skin* (1999), a collection of previously published and new poems. "An Anthem" is written in free verse broken into stanzas of varying lengths. In it, Sanchez celebrates her African-American heritage with vibrant descriptions of dance and music. Alongside this celebration is a call for courage to stand up for peace and compassion. It is a poem of resilience that acknowledges some of the ills of the world without giving up hope or identity.

Sanchez uses many styles of writing in her poetry, ranging from haikus and sonnets to free verse. "An Anthem" is representative of her work in that the style suits the content, and the content is perfectly in line with her canon of work. Throughout her career, Sanchez has written about the importance of peace, even when pursuing it is uncomfortable or dangerous. Her writings about African-American themes often have a collective application, as "An Anthem" does. Although the speaker in the poem asks for personal courage, the word "we" dominates the poem.

Author Biography

Originally named Wilsonia Benita Driver on September 9, 1934, poet Sonia Sanchez was reared in the American South. She was born in Birmingham, Alabama, and her mother died in childbirth when Sanchez was only a year old. Sanchez was reared by her grandmother until she also died when Sanchez was only six years old. At this time, she and her siblings returned to Harlem to live with their father, who was a schoolteacher. It was also at this time that Sanchez began to write. The loss of her grandmother and the development of a stutter prompted her to find expression through writing. In Harlem Sanchez learned the dialect of the street that would later characterize so much of her writing. In New York, she learned that racism was not confined to the South, although its northern manifestation was different.

Sanchez acquired much of her education in New York, first earning her bachelor's degree at Hunter College before attending New York University for post-graduate study. She went to Ohio to attend Wilberforce University, where she completed her doctorate. As a professor and lecturer, Sanchez has worked all over the United States, including San Francisco, Pittsburgh, New York City, Amherst, and Philadelphia. In addition to being a respected teacher and scholar, Sanchez won awards for her other activities, her poetry, children's books, her other publications, and her work as a social activist. Over the course of her career, Sanchez was honored by her peers, readers, and literary organizations. Her honors include a PEN Award (1969) and Arts Fellowship (1993–1994), a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1970), a Lucretia Mott Award (1984), an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation for *homegirls & handgrenades* (1985), a Pennsylvania Governor's Award in the humanities (1989), an Oni Award from the International Black Women's Congress (1992), a Roots Award from the Pan-African Studies Community Program (1993), and a Legacy Award from Jomandi Productions (1995).

Sanchez was committed to encouraging other literary voices; earlier in her career, she refused royalties on her books because she wanted to invest in her publishers and encourage them to publish works by other young writers. Her own work was influenced by the writings of Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, Countee Cullen, and Gwendolyn Brooks.

Her first published book was a collection of poetry, *Homecoming* (1969). Sanchez's next volume, *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), is a collection of poems with a specifically African-American point of view. In it, the poet emphasizes the strength and character of a people with a unique identity. The 1973 collection, *Love Poems*, was published after Sanchez aligned herself with the Nation of Islam; as a result, the perspective reflects a stronger emphasis on building unity among African Americans. *I've Been a Woman* (1978) demonstrates Sanchez's growth as a poet and as a woman. Here, she writes to share wisdom and encouragement. In 1987, *Under a Soprano Sky* was published. The poems contained in this volume are grounded in the real world; Sanchez addresses issues and topics of the day, and she conveys general truths through telling individual stories. *Wounded in the House of a Friend* (1995) is difficult for many readers. Sanchez

explores the pain and harshness of difficult experiences. From drug addicts to rapists to betrayal, nothing is off-limits as Sanchez seeks to lay bare the worst of the human condition. In 1999, *Shake Loose My Skin* was published. “An Anthem” appears in this collection. This poem is an expression of Sanchez’s love for her heritage and the need for courage when people take to the streets in protest. It is in content and style representative of much of her work.

As a social activist, Sanchez has been committed to racial and gender equality. She has taught many courses at the college level on black studies, has participated in demonstrations, and has expressed through her writing her vision for peace and freedom. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, her desire for racial equality led her to join Malcolm X’s Black Muslim organization, but she eventually left. Although she supported the religion and the discipline, she was frustrated by its treatment of women. She continued to speak out against inequality and negative stereotypes, although she admits that being so outspoken came at a personal and professional price. Often labeled as a radical, she endured the backlash of government agencies, peers, and even a landlord. Still, her commitment to her beliefs came first.

As of 2007, Sanchez was teaching at Temple University in Philadelphia.

Plot Summary

“An Anthem” begins with a statement of unity: “Our vision is our voice.” The speaker then explains that “we” go all over the country seeking out those who are in favor of war. In the next stanza, the speaker identifies who she and her group are, but she does it in figurative terms. She says that they are people of fire and ceremony who speak with condemned mouths. In other words, they are people of strength, determination, and heritage who continue to speak out even though they are rebuked for it.

The third stanza continues to describe the speaker and her people as having wisdom and purpose. They can do things in their hearts that they do not have to do physically. She says, “we run without legs,” meaning that they can move forward or away without physically going anywhere at all. She also says that they “see without eyes,” indicating that they know things apart from what they actually see. Their understanding is greater than their direct experience. Her statement that “loud laughter breaks over our heads” indicates joy and camaraderie in the culture of their community.

The next two lines appear three times in the poem. They are: “give me courage so I can spread / it over my face and mouth.” The speaker acknowledges that she needs courage to face problems or conditions in the world that demand attention. Her previous reference to war suggests that she asks for courage to advocate peace. It is interesting that here she moves from “we” to “me,” so that the reader knows that the speaker is part of a community and she embraces its heritage and culture, but she asks for personal courage. She confronts difficulties that she will have to fight alone, and she wants to be prepared. She describes courage as something that can be given to someone, and it is something that is worn right on a person’s face and is expressed in a person’s words.

The speaker returns to describing her people, and now she likens them to a secret river, a life source that is unrecognized. The women working and marching, moving like a river, can see what is hiding behind trees. In this stanza, Sanchez introduces the motif of singing and dancing. The dancing is depicted as “shaking hips,” and their voices are depicted as “thunder.”

The sixth stanza describes divisiveness and conflict in a world “split wide open.” Sanchez writes that “the world is broken into little pieces / and you beg with tin cups for life.” The speaker then asks if she and her people are not more than hunger, music, harlequins (clowns in traditional European theater), horns, color, drums, anger, or dance. This is her way of demanding that her community be respected as a whole rather than dismissed or relegated to a single aspect of their history or culture. Again she repeats the lines about courage.

The next two stanzas are the poem’s longest, at six lines each. In the first, the speaker relates the fact that her people are always moving, usually from the top to the bottom. She refers to the thunder god, Shango, a deity in Yoruban culture. (The Yoruba are a West African ethnic group.) In the second of these two stanzas, the speaker addresses the enemy for the first time, the “madmen” with their “death talk.” She warns them that

she and her people are not afraid and that they are going on the offensive to stop their madness and their destruction. The protesters are strengthened by nature (the sun and the rain) and by injustice in the world (“children of Soweto”). (Soweto, an acronym for southwest townships and a city formed in 1991 near Johannesburg, South Africa, was the scene of a 1976 uprising by black students against apartheid in which hundreds were murdered.)

The speaker closes the poem with an image of red rain (which could be interpreted as blood), and the fire of her people mixing with water. She says their fire “mixes with the water,” which means in this context not that the water douses the fire but rather that the fire ignites and spreads with the blood. To finish the poem, the speaker repeats for the last time, a plea for “courage so I can spread it / over my face and mouth.”

Themes

Courage to Protest

In the repetition of the words, “give me courage so I can spread / it over my face and mouth,” Sanchez asserts the speaker’s plea, almost as a prayer, for courage to face seemingly overwhelming obstacles. She wants to wash in this courage and drink it. The speaker needs to acquire courage, and she is eager to wear it on her face and to speak it with her mouth. An important point about courage is that it is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to do something despite the fear. That is the speaker’s position: She is not brimming with her own courage; she is afraid. She asks for courage in order to carry on with what she is committed to do: wage and protest against injustice and suffering

In the third line, the speaker identifies what intimidates: “madmen goosestep[ping] in tune to Guernica.” The reference here is to the 1937 destruction of the Basque city of Guernica by a combined air attack of Nazi German and Fascist Italian air forces. The leveling of this city was considered by Nazi commanders as an experiment to see what destroying a city requires militarily and a chance for pilots to get experience in dropping bombs. The attack laid waste the city, and an estimated two thousand people, mostly women and children, were killed. The speaker is enraged by this event and all other events in which people, who only really want to live their lives, are murdered by madmen. The speaker’s protest in this poem joins that made by the painter Pablo Picasso who made a large painting, entitled *Guernica*, as an antiwar protest. In the face of the horrors of war and the carnage wrought by violent attacks on protesters, as occurred in Soweto, the speaker asks for courage to yell in the streets and vigorously confront politicians in an all out effort to assert human rights.

Ethnic Pride

The ethnic pride in “An Anthem” is difficult to miss. The speaker identifies struggles that bring her people together against common enemies of human rights, and she offers the spirit of her people as the force to stop oppression. From the first line (“Our vision is our voice”), the speaker establishes a community created by a similar philosophy. These protesters have a single vision and a single voice.

Beginning in the second stanza, the speaker introduces imagery that calls to mind African dances and ceremonies. She says they “walk with ceremonial breaths,” which suggests ceremonies charged with purpose and passion. The refrain, “give me courage so I can spread / it over my face and mouth,” seems to link ceremonial face painting with wearing courage in the modern world.

Other references to African dances reinforce the theme of ethnic pride. Words and phrases like “shaking hips,” “color and drums,” “anger and dance,” Shango, and

Soweto, all work to reveal the speaker’s pride in her African ethnicity and the strength she finds in that identity.

Style

Repetition

Sanchez uses two literary devices of repetition in “An Anthem” to underscore images and ideas that are central to the poem’s meaning. The first device is anaphora, a type of parallelism. Anaphora is repetition of the same word or words at the start of two or more sentences. Walt Whitman famously uses it in *Leaves of Grass*. In “An Anthem,” Sanchez uses it to create thematic and structural unity. The sentences in the second and third stanzas begin with “we” just as lines 21–23 repeat “are we not.” These chant-like repetitions create a strong sense of unity or solidarity. It is the speaker’s way of saying that “we” are not going away and “we” need to be heard. The central idea of the poem is one of protest, of in-the-street chanting, and this form of repetition underscores that idea.

The other repetitive device Sanchez uses is refrain. A refrain is a phrase or sentence that is repeated within a poem or song, generally at the end of a stanza or in some other predictable way. The refrain in this poem is the plea or prayer: “give me courage so I can spread / it over my face and mouth.” This is the only thing the speaker asks for outright, but she repeats it to create a sense of urgency, of immediate confrontation and need for empowerment. Three times she repeats these lines, the third occurring in the final lines, which is an emphatic and powerful site in a poem. The last lines, especially ones that have been repeated, create the reader’s final impression of the poem.

Allusion

An allusion is a reference within a literary work to a historical event or person or to another work of art. For example, classical allusions may refer to mythology; biblical allusions refer to stories or people in the Bible; and literary allusions refer to stories or characters from other literary works. In three places, Sanchez uses allusion to pull meaning into her poem. In the third line, she refers to the “goosestep,” a word used to describe the Nazi soldiers in parade march, which is characterized by a strong forward kick. She also mentions Guernica, which is the name of the Basque city which was destroyed in 1937 by Nazi and Fascist bomber pilots and is also the name of Picasso’s anti-war protest painting. The historical place and the painting give specific examples of the type of enemy the group in the poem protests against. They “cut through the country” where Fascists march to the “tune” of urban decimation.

In the tenth stanza, the speaker infuses her group of protesters with the power of Shango, the thunder god or sky father worshipped in Africa and South America, where he is called Changó. Shango was the main god of the Oyo people, West Africans who were enslaved and taken to Brazil and the Caribbean islands. In all, Shango came to symbolize African resistance to slavery. By alluding to this god, the speaker makes references in an economical way to all multiple historical instances of racial injustice.

Finally, the mention of Soweto is a reference to both the economic inequities and the race riots that began in this township area near Johannesburg in 1976. She says nothing of the riots or the murder of school children, only that the protesters see through the eyes of Soweto children, meaning that they too witness racial prejudice, oppression, and brutality. This allusion pinpoints the type of oppression that the speaker and her group rise up to challenge.

Historical Context

War and Political Violence in the Mid- to Late 1980s

The mid- to late-1980s witnessed war and political violence in many countries. During the first half of the 1980s, the Ayatollah Khomeini instituted terrorism against his people in Iran to subject them to his rule. Among his methods was execution of his own people, including underage children and youths, political personnel, and adherents to minority religions. In 1985, Juan Peron, the leader of a junta in Argentina, and four of his commanders were convicted of human rights violations against the Argentinean people during Peron's military rule. During the hearings, the atrocities committed during the repressive rule came to light. U.S. president Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev began arms negotiations to keep nuclear weapon build-up under control because a nuclear war would be devastating and self-defeating. Beginning in 1986 and lasting almost two years, trials against 476 members of the Sicilian mafia took place. The trials brought to light the violence and intimidation used by the mafia in its pursuit of power and wealth. Ultimately, sentences were passed down for 338 of the defendants, with prison terms sentenced and a total of more than ten million dollars in fines.

Shango

Shango is a prominent figure in Nigerian Yoruba mythology. He has other names in other cultures, but the character of the deity is consistent. Based on the fourth king of Oyo, Shango was deified after his death. There are various legends regarding his birth. In one legend, Shango is the son of Aganju, the god of fire; this is pertinent to "An Anthem" because of Sanchez's references to her people being of fire.

He is the ancestor of the Yoruba, the god of thunder and weather, and he is symbolized by a double-sided axe that represents justice and discipline. Shango has come to symbolize African resistance to European domination. He is also closely associated with music and dance. According to tradition, worship of Shango enables followers to be possessed by his very spirit, which gives them strength, discipline, and calm in the face of great difficulty.

Soweto

Racial tensions in South Africa came to a head on June 16, 1976, when protests against the government and the police resulted in a full-scale riot in Soweto, a township outside Johannesburg. The protest involved ten thousand students who challenged the new school policy of teaching in Afrikaans, the language of the Dutch minority who ruled South Africa. In truth, the protests that June were aimed at hundreds of laws meant to tighten further the oppression of black South Africans. Conditions were harsh, and black Africans, although they outnumbered the whites, endured poverty, unemployment, inadequate health care, and no voice in the government. In contrast, white South

Africans had far greater power, opportunity, wealth, and resources, despite the fact that they were the minority. This unequal treatment was coupled with a system of racial segregation known as apartheid.

Leaders, including Desmond Tutu, had warned officials that the people of Soweto would not stand for being treated badly much longer and that its youth were likely to take action. The protests in June began nonviolently, with students carrying signs, but the conflict intensified, and police used tear gas, which led to students throwing rocks, which escalated to gunfire. Students were joined by others who helped overturn police vehicles, set fires, and attack white people. The protests spread to other parts of South Africa, and violence erupted in other townships. The riots tragically resulted in the deaths of seven hundred black Africans and the injuries to five thousand more in Soweto alone; estimates for the whole country are several thousand. The Soweto riots led to outright rebellion that remained intense for months. Besides the dramatic increase in violence, the Soweto riots led to the formation of guerrilla groups, liberation organizations, and black pride. Apartheid came under attack as it never had before.

Critical Overview

Under a Soprano Sky is a collection of poetry that explores themes of racial identity and empowerment. These themes are also handled in “An Anthem.” Sanchez also muses on the troubles of modern life, including the loss of her brother from AIDS and the young generations’ ignorance of their heritage as a source of pride and identity. In response to *Under a Soprano Sky*, Kamili Anderson of *Belles Lettres* comments that Sanchez “may be the most undeservedly underspoken of contemporary women poets in America.” Anderson calls the collection “hot enough to melt rock” yet “introspective and intricate.” Contrasting Sanchez’s work to that of her peers, Anderson notes, “Few poets write with more succinctness or intensity.” Echoing Anderson’s sentiments is Joanne Veal Gabbin, contributor of a chapter about Sanchez in *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation*. Gabbin finds that in *Under a Soprano Sky*,

the mature voice of the poet is giving expression to the sources of her spiritual strength, establishing and reestablishing connections that recognize the family-hood of man/womankind, and singing . . . of society’s strange fruit sacrificed on the altars of political megalomania, economic greed, and social misunderstanding.

Author and interviewer, Joyce A. Joyce has spent considerable time with Sanchez. In *Ijala: Sonia Sanchez and the African Poetic Tradition*, Joyce assesses the poet’s various collections. She remarks that *Under a Soprano Sky* shows growth, as it brings “to maturity the poet’s skillful use of lyricism and images that first became apparent in the new poems collected in *I’ve Been a Woman* (1978).” Joyce explains that *Under a Soprano Sky* is less confrontational and aggressive than Sanchez’s earlier work. This book, Joyce states, “is a *revolutionary* collection in which the poems reflect the poet’s inward movement and a desire . . . to strengthen and change herself in order to continue her struggle to change the world.”

Regarding 1999’s *Shake Loose My Skin* appeared (in which “An Anthem” appeared for a second time), Sanchez’s readers and critics were enthusiastic. Because this book contains selections from six prior collections along with a handful of new poems, it offers a record of Sanchez’s growth as a writer and philosopher. In *Booklist*, Donna Seaman characterizes Sanchez as an “outspoken and unflinching poet, innovative in her improvisation on meter and form.” Seaman adds that Sanchez has the ability to give “shape and sound to every shade of mood.” Jabari Asim of *American Visions* calls Sanchez “one of the most admired poets of her generation” and applauds “the depth and passion Sanchez brings to her life and her work.” *Library Journal*’s Ron Antonucci boldly states that the “indomitable Sanchez is on fire” in *Shake Loose My Skin*. Ann K. van Buren points out Sanchez’s success in showing that topics such as drug abuse, racism, and poverty are appropriate for poetry. They write that *Shake Loose My Skin* “leaves one in awe of the stretches of language Sanchez has helped to legitimize throughout her career.”

Critics frequently evaluate Sanchez’s poetry from the perspective of effective social activism. “An Anthem” fits neatly in this area. In *Heart & Soul*, Dahna Chandler notes

that after decades of commitment, Sanchez is still writing her “unwavering call to arms.” A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* finds “Sanchez is at her best when enacting power struggles rather than merely rallying political support in easy battlecries.” Yusef Salaam of *New York Amsterdam News* reported about Sanchez’s being honored at the Langston Hughes Festival in New York. He quotes Joyce as stating that “Sanchez’s primary focus in her work is ‘group survival,’ the growth and development of African peoples and humanity.” Joyce also stated that Sanchez’s poems “are not emotional quick-fixes, but contain a power to propel the reader or listener ‘to action.’” This description perfectly describes “An Anthem” and many other poems of hers about social injustice.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she provides an overview of African dance as an important context for Sonia Sanchez's "An Anthem."

In most cultures, dance has an important place. In fact, the diversity of dance styles is so great that cultures can be recognized by their traditional dances, even by someone with only a passing knowledge of dance history. What is it about dance that speaks so clearly to and about a culture? In Sonia Sanchez's "An Anthem," the poet weaves dance and music imagery into a poem that makes strong statements against war and injustice and about the need for courage. Central to the message of the poem are the descriptions of African dance and dancers because from them comes a sense of identity, community, and roots. A study of specific African dances would require volumes, as each tribe and culture has developed its own dances over centuries. Here, African dance is discussed in general terms in order to shed light on why and how Sanchez uses it to bring energy and depth to her poem.

In the early 2000s, modern dancers continue to learn and embrace traditional African dance, music, and costumes. African Americans committed to preserving their heritage include the cultural traditions of music and dance.

In African culture, dance has played important social, religious, symbolic, military, and occupational roles. In most cases, a dance holds a primary purpose but is carried out in such a way that secondary functions are also served. For example, a hunter's dance may be intended to show the tribe how an animal was killed and to acknowledge the animal's spirit, but it also showcases the athleticism and skill of the hunters who perform the dance. Similarly, a dance performed in a particular Yoruba town is meant to honor Mother Earth, but it also disparages immorality and draws sharp contrasts with its depiction of the genders.

Even the most casual observers may notice that dances often draw distinctions among tribal members based on age, status, occupation, or gender. Dances often give different segments of the tribe an opportunity to express themselves in ways that are suited to their age or gender. Dances for older members are generally slower and more elegant; dances for young women are often flowing and feminine; and dances for midlife men are often energetic and forceful. Some tribes even use dance to signal transitions from one age group to another, which is especially important when youths are admitted to adulthood. In these cases, dances often indicate readiness and desirability for marriage or serve as an initiation into a new social group. Dances for young men serve a secondary purpose of providing exercise and conditioning to keep them in shape for fighting and hunting. Dances also function to separate by status, as leadership within

the tribe can be identified within certain dances. Dance can affirm leadership, show loyalty to leaders, and honor past leaders of the tribe.

Dance and religion are closely intertwined in African cultures as a way to create union between the body and the spirit. Dances are used as an extension of religious powers when they are performed to cast out evil spirits, call on fertility gods, and demand discipline in purification rituals. Dancers who perform in rituals are trained for many years, often beginning very young. In some cases, as in the worship of Shango (who is mentioned by Sanchez in “An Anthem”), dances represent the worshippers being overtaken by the spirit of the deity. Other qualities of dances to Shango are expressed in Sanchez’s poem. Yoruba priests express Shango’s thunderous rage by rhythmic and rapid pounding on drums, rolling their shoulders, and stomping their feet. Related to religious ceremonies are other ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. These are accompanied by dances traditional within each society. Wedding dances are celebratory and symbolic, while funeral dances are performed to complete burial, provide comfort, and honor the dead and the dead person’s legacy.

Military dances can be performed to relate ancestral history, recall great heroes of the tribe, and honor the military, in general. They also energize the warriors as they prepare for battle, generate a strong sense of camaraderie among them, and give the tribe an opportunity to express admiration and gratitude to them. The demanding dances require physical fitness, thus showing the warriors’ strength while providing exercise. Similarly, other male groups dance together to commemorate success in harvest, hunting, or building. These dances present stylized movements specific to the group’s role, such as casting nets or growing crops.

Numerous dances are known as masquerades because they involve masks of some kind worn by some or all of the participants. This is relevant to “An Anthem” because the refrain, “give me courage so I can spread / it over my face and mouth.” These words describe courage as something that covers the speaker’s face like a mask. In masquerades, a dancer is often chosen (and his identity kept secret) to represent the deity by wearing a mask or cloth over his head and face. Other dances involve performers wearing masks to represent animals, spirits, or qualities. Masks, like dance movements, can be highly symbolic. A mask of an animal might just represent the animal in the context of a hunt or a story, or it may symbolize a quality such as power, strength, or status. Some of the dances feature masks so heavy that the dancer can barely move at all while wearing them. This is intended to strip the dancer of freedom and encourage purification and discipline.

The central role of dance in African cultures is evident in its continuation among slave groups in the Americas. In fact, slave groups often created new dances in traditional styles to represent their experience as slaves. Because slaves were assimilated into their new cultures, their dances became blends of the traditional African styles and the new styles they learned in the Americas. The extent of this blend depended on how large the slave group was (larger groups had more success in preserving the original dances than smaller ones) and how often new slaves from Africa were added. Interesting to the context of this essay, West African societies such as the Yoruba

(indirectly referred to in Sanchez's poem through the allusion to Shango) were the sources of the dominant dance styles.

Music accompanies dance, and African music has a distinct quality. Drums and other instruments that are pounded or scraped are common across African cultures. Often dancers' costumes include rattles on the costumes themselves or on straps worn around the ankles. All of these instruments reinforce the importance of rhythm in African dance. In some areas, instruments such as flutes and horns are used.

In the early 2000s, modern dancers continue to learn and embrace traditional African dance, music, and costumes. African Americans committed to preserving their heritage include the cultural traditions of music and dance. These dances include those of Africa as well as those of slave ancestors. Notable choreographers in this area include Katherine Dunham, Alvin Ailey, and Talley Beatty. The preservation of dance is not limited to performance, however, as proven by Sanchez. With her energetic descriptions of "ceremonial breaths" and "shaking hips," Sanchez brings life to "An Anthem." She describes a community that runs, sees, and laughs loudly. But she cautions that they are more than cultural elements like music, horns, color, drums, and dance. Still, through cultural unity, she believes that with courage, she and the other protesters can stare down "madmen" war makers and bring justice to a world that desperately needs it.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "An Anthem," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• Choose two African American female poets and select two poems by each poet that you think are typical of each poet's work (either in terms of content or form). Choose one other poem by Sanchez besides “An Anthem” so that you have two of her poems. Compare and contrast the six poems and create a presentation that gives a little bit of background information on each poet, along with your observations on the poems. Your presentation can be in whatever format you choose.

• Observe African dance and celebration. Drawing from your observations on the costumes, music, energy, and meaning, write a poem capturing your impressions.

• Research Sanchez’s life to find out more about her social activism. Do you think there is a connection between her motivation to write and her motivation to bring about change? Can you think of other people who fit the same profile? Write an introduction to a biography of Sanchez in which you explore the relationship between writing and working for social change.

• Sanchez was born in the South and lived there for part of her childhood before moving to New York. Read about these two areas during the years Sanchez was there as a child and teenager. What historical, economic, and cultural characteristics and events were most prominent? How might these realities have influenced her? Draw up a two-sided chart presenting the major factors in each area. Illustrate your chart with drawings, photos, maps, and any other visual elements. Write a conclusion explaining how you think these factors influenced Sanchez in adulthood. You may want to look for additional poems to support your assertions.

• “The Anthem” mentions Soweto. Read more about what happened in Soweto, what “Soweto” means, and what the long-term ramifications were for the riots there. What is apartheid and what is its status today? Write about your findings in a magazine article, locate photos to go with it, and format it to look like a magazine spread.

Compare and Contrast

• **1987:** By writing about what conditions they believe need changing, African American women continue the tradition of such protest writers as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Zora Neale Hurston, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Prominent African American women whose writing calls for change, justice, and freedom include Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, and Alice Walker (whose *The Color Purple* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1983), and Gloria Naylor (whose *The Women of Brewster Place* won the National Book Award in 1983).

• **Today:** African American women's voices are still heard through the works of writers with vision for the betterment of society and for black women, in particular. Toni Morrison (who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993) and Maya Angelou are still important voices, along with newer voices, such as Edwidge Danticat and Pearl Cleage.

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• **1987:** Apartheid (the official segregation of races) is still in effect in South Africa. It is a system that perpetuates the political and economic powerlessness of non-Europeans. Under apartheid, people are legally categorized by race and then assigned to live in certain areas based on those categories. In addition to political power through voting, rights denied to non-Europeans include access to education and adequate medical care. In response, twenty-five nations, including the United States, have trade sanctions against South Africa.

• **Today:** As of 1994, the apartheid system is no longer legal in South Africa. Thanks to the political, social, and economic pressures of numerous organizations, and the dedication of South Africa's president, Nelson Mandela, who headed the country from 1994 to 1999, apartheid was dismantled. Today, all citizens enjoy equal rights and participate in the political process.

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• **1987:** Dictatorships exist in several countries. In Chile, under Augusto Pinochet Ugarte thousands of Chileans are imprisoned, tortured, and killed, while others disappear. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein imprisons, tortures, and kills groups and individuals who oppose his regime. Hussein commits genocide against Sunni Muslims and Kurds, and unknown thousands die. In the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos is recently driven into exile (1986) by the people after decades of martial law, human rights violations, corruption, and nepotism.

- **Today:** In North Korea, dictator Kim Jong Il keeps the country completely closed from the rest of the world. He uses resources to build the military rather than feed starving North Koreans in the midst of drought and famine. Terrorist organizations are more organized that ever before. However, Saddam Hussein is found guilty of genocide and hanged, leaving Iraq in a turmoil as it attempts to form a new system of government.

What Do I Read Next?

- Robin Behn's *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets who Teach* (1992) is a practical way for aspiring poets to gain insight and guidance from numerous writing teachers. The book contains ninety exercises, along with essays to help readers hone their poetry-writing skills.

- In the mid-1950s, Sanchez studied with Louise Bogan at New York University. *The Blue Estuaries: Poems: 1923–1968* (1995) presents Bogan's work.

- Joyce A. Joyce's *Ijala: Sonia Sanchez and the African Poetic Tradition* (1997) covers over thirty years of Sanchez's work. The critical analysis is written in a style accessible to a wide audience.

- Sonia Sanchez's *I've Been a Woman: New and Selected Poems* (1985) provides a unified vision of Sanchez's female-centered poetic voice and expresses her hopes for other women.

- Claudia Tate's *Black Women Writers at Work* (1983) presents the results of Tate's interviews with fourteen female writers that focused on their writing process and how their ethnicity has played a part in their creativity. Writers include Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, and Sonia Sanchez.

Further Study

Joyce, Joyce A., *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez (Literary Conversations)*, University Press of Mississippi, 2007.

Joyce has spent considerable time with Sanchez over the years, having the opportunity to interview her about her craft and her purpose in writing. In this collection of interviews, readers learn about how Sanchez's writing craft and subject matter have changed over three decades, during which time Sanchez was an activist, mother, and teacher.

Ling, Peter J., and Sharo Monteith, eds., *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement*, Routledge, 1999.

Ling and Monteith have compiled an anthology of writings exploring the role of gender issues during the American civil rights movement. The essays address important events, legislation, key figures, and philosophies.

Sanchez, Sonia, *The Adventures of Fathead, Smallhead, and Squarehead*, Third Press Review of Books, 1973.

Among Sanchez's best known children's books, this is the story of three friends who gain insight about what is really smart and what is really dumb.

Stone, Ruth M., *Africa (Garland Encyclopedia of World Music)*, Routledge, 1997.

This volume includes a wealth of information about Africa and how music and dance are an integral part of African culture. Stone covers general topics about music, dance, ritual, and expression, but also discusses subjects specific to certain regions. The book includes a CD.

Young, Kevin, *Jelly Roll: A Blues*, Knopf, 2003.

Young is an African American poet whose writing is influenced by music of all kinds. In this collection, readers see how everything from jazz to classical music informs his poetic vision and expression.

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Gabbin, Joanne Veal, “The Southern Imagination of Sonia Sanchez,” in *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation*, University of Alabama Press, 1990, p. 183.

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Review of *Shake Loose My Skin*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 245, No. 51, December 21, 1998, p. 63.

Salaam, Yusef, “Sonia Returns Victorious and Honored,” in *New York Amsterdam News*, Vol. 90, No. 48, November 25, 1999, p. 21.

Sanchez, Sonia, “An Anthem,” in *Shake Loose My Skin*, Beacon Press, 1999, pp. 75–76.

Seaman, Donna, Review of *Shake Loose My Skin*,” in *Booklist*, Vol. 95, No. 12, February 15, 1999, p. 1028.

Van Buren, Ann K., Review of *Shake Loose My Skin*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 124, No. 2, February 1, 1999, p. 93.

BOOKRAGS

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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