The Art of the Novel Study Guide

The Art of the Novel by Natasha Saje

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Natasha Sajé's □The Art of the Novel□ appears in her 2004 collection *Bend*. The poem's speaker is an intellectual literary critic with a longstanding love of literature who ultimately chooses not to allow literature to influence her personal romantic aspirations. In twelve free-verse couplets, she discusses love themes from novels, and she lists many of the heroines of classic fiction. Because she finds too much tragedy, turmoil, and unrequited love in literature, she chooses to bid farewell to the heroines and to novels in general. She decides instead to forge her own path in life.

The poem meditates on love, independence, self-assurance, and the appropriate place of fiction in real life. Sajé peers into the mind of a speaker who has come to a crossroad in her life and who chooses risk over familiarity. Despite having spent so much of her life immersed in the world of literature, she finds herself with a clearheaded view of the world around her, and she chooses to engage that world instead of retreating into the familiar but fictional literary world.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: German

Birthdate: 1955

Natasha Sajé was born June 6, 1955, to Josef Sajé and Hiltrud Klima in Munich, Germany. She moved with her family to the United States in 1957 and spent her childhood and young adulthood in New York and New Jersey. Sajé earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Virginia in 1976, graduating with honors in English. In 1980, she completed her master's degree at Johns Hopkins University, and in 1995, she earned her doctorate in English from the University of Maryland.

Sajé's first poetry collection, *Red under the Skin*, was published in 1994. In 1993, the work had been chosen over nine hundred other manuscripts to receive the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize; it was later also awarded the Towson State Prize in literature. Additional honors for her poetry include the 1993 Academy of American Poets Prize, the 1998 Robert Winner Award from the Poetry Society of America, and the 2002 Campbell Corner Poetry Prize. In 2004, Sajé completed her second poetry collection, *Bend*, which includes □The Art of the Novel.□

Sajé's poems and articles have appeared in such journals as *Ploughshares*, *Shenandoah*, the *Writer's Chronicle*, *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, the *Henry James Review*, *Essays in Literature*, and *Dalhousie Review*. She was the Bannister writer in residence at Sweetbriar College in 1995 and was a poet in residence for the Maryland State Arts Council from 1989 to 1998. Sajé has also been an associate professor of English at Westminster College in Salt Lake City, Utah, where she has also served as the Weeks Poetry Series administrator. In addition, she has taught in the Vermont College Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-5

□The Art of the Novel□ opens with a reference to the story line of Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*, with the comment that back in 1790, □a woman could die by falling□ in love with a forbidden man. A specific reference to the title of Inchbald's book follows, with the text □A Simple Story.□ In lines 4 and 5, a single word, □Ruined,□ is set apart with a period from the speaker's comparison of a woman to a building and of love to □centuries of bad weather.□ These images reflect the speaker's view of love as something that slowly batters and erodes an otherwise strong and stable woman. Sajé continues with the image □*A mirror carried on a highway*,□ referring to the French author Henri Stendhal's own description of his novel *The Red and the Black*.

Lines 6-7

The speaker now mentions two tragic heroines: Emma Bovary of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Lily Bart of Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*. Stendhal's □highway□ becomes a □highway to hell, with me riding shotgun.□ The speaker thus feels that she has suffered through the heartbreak felt by Emma and Lily as she read these novels and emotionally invested herself in their outcomes.

Lines 8-11

In lines 8 and 9, the speaker admits that she was drawn to the tragedy of *Madame Bovary* but wonders if it was because she herself was not in Emma's predicament or because she felt as though Emma □could be me.□ This is an important moment in the poem, in which the speaker pauses from her reflection on literature to focus for a moment on her own life. This self-reflection leads her to remember that she has spent years concentrating on fiction, years □spent in a haze.□ By living through fictional characters, writing about them, and providing critical analysis of the stories in which they appear (□looking for loopholes in cloth woven tight□), she has failed to engage the real world that is all around her.

Lines 12-20

The idea that the modern world is no different from the world portrayed in classic literature is introduced briefly in lines 12 and 13. The speaker realizes that love in her world can still be fatal, but now strong women, like the fictional heroines she has admired, can start their own companies. Line 14 denotes a turn in the poem, with the speaker's declaration □But I've had it with this form of desire, this / continuous dream.□ At this moment, she decides that living her life immersed in stories about fictional people from long ago is not a healthy approach to life. One by one, she bids farewell to

seven tragic heroines and their broken hearts. She then bids farewell to novels in general, but she cannot completely let go of her years of formal training. As she releases herself from the hold of fiction, she quotes Georg Lukács, a Russian critic who said, "The novel is the epic of a world abandoned by God." This statement alludes to the idea that the concept of rejecting fiction is not new to the world, but it is a new consideration in the speaker's own life.

Lines 21-24

As the poem closes, the speaker acknowledges that novels have broadened her horizons but have also kept her on the "beltway," which means that she could go where a novel took her but that she could not stray from the book's path. This reference also reminds the reader of the previous Stendhal quote about a highway. When the speaker says, "My odometer's clicked / past the point of counting," she realizes that the metaphorical car she has been driving on the beltway/highway has been driven for too long. She decides that it is time to get out and forge her own path in the real world—a risky endeavor for the speaker, who is accustomed to the safety of being guided through fiction. Now, however, she is ready to be her own guide and to engage the real world.

Themes

Fiction versus Real Life

In □The Art of the Novel,□ Sajé depicts a woman whose life has centered on classic novels and their heroines. The speaker clearly loves literature and has given it an important place in her life. She writes that the plots have unfolded □with me riding shotgun□ and that novels have □made my world bigger.□ These images are indicative of a person who has allowed classic fiction to be a very real part of her life and who has permitted herself to be deeply influenced by what she reads. The speaker not only loves literature as a pastime, she has also made a career of writing about it. Presumably, she is a literary critic or a scholar, based on the lines □Years spent in a haze / of fiction, living through characters, writing about them, / looking for loopholes in cloth woven tight.□ She seems to have spent many years closely reading well-crafted novels, writing about them and their characters as she scrutinized the text.

As the poem progresses, the speaker comes to a point where she makes a life-changing decision to set fiction aside in favor of experiencing the real world firsthand. In lines 14 and 15, she writes, □But I've had it with this form of desire, this / continuous dream: I can't read in the past tense,□ which reveals her choice to live in the present. At the end of the poem, the speaker essentially gets out of the car in which she has been riding shotgun so she can pursue □footpaths, or no paths.□ She likens reading fiction to being on a highway or beltway; these are well-traveled, basically safe paths. They take passengers to faraway destinations, but they also confine passengers to the highway itself. The speaker opts to venture off on her own, onto slower, more personalized paths. It is a choice much like the one Robert Frost makes in □The Road Not Taken,□ in which he chooses □the [path] less traveled by.□ For the speaker in □The Art of the Novel,□ the choice is a risky one because she has always found adventure, love, relationships, and human experience within the safe pages of books. The place of fiction in her life thus changes from being the very framework of her experience to being merely a part of her knowledge base.

Role of Women

In the opening statements of □The Art of the Novel,□ women seem fragile and vulnerable to the consequences of their emotions. Sajé tells the reader that in 1790 a woman could actually die just from falling in love with the wrong man. This is a startling opening that makes the reader wonder if the speaker will elaborate on how fragile women are or will continue to explain how women today are much stronger. In line 3, Sajé clarifies that her opening statement is, in fact, a brief plot summary of *A Simple Story*, a novel by Elizabeth Inchbald. As the poem continues, the speaker makes clear that she does not see women as helpless victims but rather as people who make choices for themselves. Not all of these choices are good and healthy, however, as evidenced by the mention of such tragic characters as Emma Bovary, Lily Bart, and

Scarlett O'Hara. Line 9 reveals that the speaker sees in these tragic characters the frightening possibility of her own potential. The line also reveals that the speaker is a woman who does not yet know herself very well.

In lines 12 and 13, the speaker contrasts the restrictive societies of the past with contemporary society. While in the past women were subject to the pain of heartache with few ways to take control, contemporary women have opportunities to wield power, such as starting their own businesses. Sajé writes, □Perhaps nothing's changed, love is still fatal, / except today she starts her own company.□ The remark that □love is still fatal□ is almost parenthetical; the speaker is saying that although women have more outlets than they did in the past, they are still vulnerable to the pitfalls of love.

More subtly, the speaker herself has made a career that women in the past did not have. She is a literary scholar who writes intellectually about great works of fiction, whereas in the past women were not even expected to read or to have opinions about intellectual matters. Because the speaker is so well versed in stories of women of the past, she understands that she lives in a cultural reality different from those of many of the heroines from classic fiction.

Style

Apostrophe

For the first fifteen lines of the poem, the speaker seems to be talking to an anonymous confidant. At the end of line 16, the speaker reveals the audience being addressed in the poem. She is talking to fiction itself, in the forms of characters and the novel genre. After lamenting the heartache of numerous novels and expressing her own emotional stake in them, she directly addresses the heroines of those novels. She bids farewell to Tess (from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*), Moll (from Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*), Clarissa (from Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*), and four others. She then turns her attention to the real villain, in lines 18 and 19: "And for the record, novel, / I abandon you." This marks a turning point in the poem and in the poet's life. She has reached a crossroad where she must decide whether to continue living the lives already written in classic novels or close her books and get out in the world. Sajé effectively communicates the drama and importance of this moment by using apostrophe, direct address to an inanimate object, a concept, or a nonexistent person. Because the speaker addresses the novel, a nonliving thing that cannot respond to her, the reader understands that the speaker is really talking to herself in a symbolic way. By using numerous other literary devices throughout the poem (including allusion, simile, metaphor, symbolism, assonance, alliteration, and oxymoron), the speaker shows that she knows how to "talk" to works of literature in their own unique language.

Couplet Structure

"The Art of the Novel" is written in twelve free-verse couplets. Couplets are two lines of poetry with the same rhyme and meter, usually expressing a self-contained thought. However, the couplets in this poem do not express self-contained thoughts, with the text in each couplet extending into the next couplet to finish the thought. While the couplets give the poem a visually ordered appearance, the content does not support this impression. Given that the poem is about the speaker's lifelong love of literature, Sajé seems to reinforce the speaker's personality by using traditional poetic form as a default. The reader senses that the speaker is expressing herself in a natural, flowing way but is somehow obligated by her training to structure the poem in a traditional form. The tension between the content and the form reflects the transition the speaker is preparing to make from relying on her knowledge of literature to relying on herself. The poem may appear to comply with convention, but it is actually a very personal expression of the speaker's decision to change the direction of her life.

Historical Context

In 2002, the Census Bureau conducted a survey to determine the cultural habits of Americans of all ages, races, and income levels. More than seventeen thousand Americans were surveyed, making it among the most comprehensive surveys of its kind ever conducted. In the reading section, participants were asked if they had read any novels, poems, short stories, or plays in the prior twelve months. The survey was called the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, and it was done at the urging of the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA). The NEA compiled the findings on reading habits into a publication called *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. When the NEA chairman, Dana Gioia, summarized the findings at a news conference at the New York Public Library held July 8, 2004, he said that the report indicated a crisis and a breakdown in adult advanced literacy.

The cause of Gioia's deep concern is that the survey reports a significant decline in literary reading across age groups. On average, the decline from 1982 to 2002 indicated 10 percent fewer literary readers, a figure that reflects a loss of 20 million potential readers. Even more troubling is that the decline is trending downward. A major concern is that the trends identified by the survey have indirect effects on society and on culture in general. Literary readers, for example, tend to be more interested in and supportive of other cultural activities and events, including volunteering.

Although the decline in literary reading was observed across demographic groups, the sharpest decline was among young adults. In fact, some estimates predict that literary reading as a leisure-time activity in this age group will be obsolete within fifty years. Comparing genders, the survey found that although literary reading has declined for both men and women, the rate for women is slower. This means that women generally read more literary materials than men do. As for genres, readers preferred novels and short stories, which were read by 45 percent of readers. Poetry was read by 12 percent, and plays were read by only 4 percent. The number of people trying their hand at creative writing, however, actually increased by 30 percent.

Critical Overview

Critics describe Sajé's poetry as appealing to both the senses and the mind. They often find her poetry to be clear, well paced, and descriptive. Her award-winning debut collection, *Red under the Skin*, was embraced by reviewers upon its release in 1994. Angela Sorby in the *Chicago Review*, for example, declares it □a substantial collection, written in a voice that is consistent without being predictable.□ Sorby later adds, □Even in her moments of weakness, this poet commands respect, because she never strains for false epiphanies or connections.□

In 2004, Sajé's second poetry collection, *Bend*, was published. Literary commentators note how skillfully Sajé presents topics as wide ranging as food and great literary figures. Some critics express surprise at her references to such writers as Cotton Mather, Mary Shelley, Marcel Proust, and Gertrude Stein. In the *Women's Review of Books*, Alison Hawthorne Deming describes *Bend* as a □finely prepared feast of pleasures, body and mind dancing through the house of her imagination. Words and images, their tumbling forward through the mind, are as delicious to this poet as a blueberry crisp.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

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 examines each literary allusion made in Sajé's poem as a way to explore new levels of meaning.

Sajé's second poetry collection, *Bend*, includes the poem □The Art of the Novel.□ In this poem, a literary scholar describes her relationship with literature and the fictional heroines of classic novels. The relationships are described in terms that reflect a very personal connection to these characters and their stories, but the speaker ultimately turns away from them so that she can see what story life has in store for her. Because the speaker's life has been so steeped in literature, it is not surprising that she introduces numerous literary allusions throughout the poem. It is also not surprising that these allusions contain valuable information about the speaker and her mindset in the moment of making her decision to seek her own path rather than to continue following fictional ones. A speaker as well read as this one can easily call up any number of characters, stories, or comments by literary critics, but she chooses the specific references used in the poem. Why these and not others? A careful reader should not assume that the choices the speaker makes about her literary allusions are random but instead that they provide important insight into the meaning of the poem. By examining them individually, readers find that the speaker will come into sharper focus, opening up a new level to the reading of the poem and to the speaker's brave decision at the end.

The poem opens with the statement that in 1790, a woman could die by making foolish or unfortunate choices in love. The third line reveals that the speaker is briefly summarizing the plot of Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*. What is revealing about the speaker, however, is that the way she presents the story initially suggests that she is relating historical information, as opposed to a bit of fiction. The speaker states the information as fact, indicating that her immersion in classic fiction has blurred the lines somewhat between fantasy and reality. This connection to literature is carried all the way to the end of the poem, even when the speaker decides to turn away from literature to face the real world. Rather than closing a book and stepping outside, she takes the time to bid farewell to seven fictional heroines and to the novel genre itself. This shows a person who feels an intensely close bond to the fiction that she loves but who realizes that the hold it has on her is not healthy. As she works through these feelings, she revisits other heroines and calls up comments made by literary theorists. Each of these references holds significance to the speaker's decision, so it is worthwhile to consider them one at a time.

The first allusion, as noted, is to *A Simple Story*. The protagonist in *A Simple Story* is Miss Milner (mentioned again in line 17 of the poem), who boldly admits her love for her guardian, a Catholic priest. Miss Milner challenges social conventions about what is appropriate for women and finds that she is unhappy when the man she loves is released from his religious vows to marry her. Her rebellious nature prevents her from being peacefully submissive to her husband's strong moral leadership in their home.

Miss Milner is a flawed character who is unable to find joy even when she gets what she thinks she wants. Her story is ultimately tragic because she takes enormous risks to win the man she loves, only to find her marriage unsuitable for her unconventional personality. This character likely appeals to the speaker in □The Art of the Novel□ because Miss Milner is independent and outspoken and believes in love. Miss Milner is also a woman who thinks that she knows herself but is actually unsure of what she needs to lead a contented and satisfying life. These are qualities to which the poem's speaker can relate, having resided so long in the world of fiction that she is unsure what would bring true love and happiness into her life.

The next allusion is to a statement made by the French author Henri Stendhal in his novel *The Red and the Black*. In the book, he describes the novel as a mirror passing over a main road, sometimes reflecting both the blue sky above and sometimes reflecting the mud below. This allusion accomplishes two things, one directly and one indirectly. The direct contribution to the poem is in the quote itself. Sajé cites only the first sentence from this quote, but her speaker certainly knows the rest of the passage. This quote introduces the idea of the role fiction plays in our lives. According to Stendhal, fiction accompanies people on their life journeys but is nothing more than a reflection of what already exists in the real world. As the quote explains, sometimes the reflection is beautiful, uplifting, and affirmative, but at other times it is harsh, realistic, and ugly. These ideas relate directly to □The Art of the Novel,□ because the poem's speaker is struggling to put fiction back in its proper place and to stop substituting it for reality. The indirect contribution this allusion makes to the poem is in knowing its source. The poem implicitly states that the quote is from *The Red and the Black*, but identifying it provides additional insight into the speaker. The novel is about a young man named Julien Sorel, who strives to overcome his humble beginnings to ascend to greater wealth and influence. Like Miss Milner in *A Simple Story*, however, Sorel never really achieves happiness, because he, too, is flawed. For all his ambition and greed, his own romanticism and the political climate of France at the time of the novel prevent him from getting everything he thinks he wants. Again, this reflects back on the poem's speaker herself.

The poem's speaker remarks that the highway mentioned by Stendhal is a □highway to hell□ for Emma Bovary and for Lily Bart. Emma Bovary is the main character of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. She marries an aging doctor so she can leave her father's farm, but she finds married life to be extremely disappointing and unromantic. She does not love or respect her husband, so she seeks exciting romance in affairs with other men. Her story is tragic because she spends so much money traveling to see her lover and buying him gifts that she commits suicide to avoid the repercussions of her inability to pay her mounting debt. Sajé introduces Madame Bovary because Bovary is a classic tragic figure whose misguided quest for love and romance bring nothing but misery and hopelessness.

The other literary character mentioned in lines 6 and 7 of □The Art of the Novel□ is Lily Bart from Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, which is set in turn-of-the-century New York. Lily wants all the power, prestige, and luxury of the upper class but is not willing to bend to the social rules that accompany such a lifestyle. Her rebellious nature

eventually costs her her social standing and her chance to live in leisure. Lily is similar to Miss Milner, who is also more committed to being herself than to being what society expects her to be; in both cases, this fidelity to self comes at a high price. Sajé's speaker is sympathetic toward these characters, calling them □ruined□ and on a □highway to hell.□ It is not clear whether the poem's speaker admires the spirit of these characters or if she is just moved by their dire fates. It is clear that she is fixating on heroines whose lives were tragic and lonely.

In line 16, the speaker begins a list of seven female protagonists from major works of classic literature. Her rapid-fire delivery of the names signals an increase in the pace of the speaker's intentions to put them behind her and move on to the real world. The reader, however, should pause to consider briefly why the speaker is thinking of these seven women at this important moment in her life. The first heroine is Tess from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Tess endures extreme trials in her life as she struggles to care for her family, make a good marriage, and release herself from the grasp of an immoral and conniving man. In the end, she commits murder to free herself from him and is arrested and put to death for her crime. Tess is driven by the knowledge that a good life is available to her if she can only escape from her circumstances.

Then there is the title character from Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, set in England. Moll's story is tragedy turned to triumph. Orphaned when her criminal mother dies, Moll struggles in her early years, only to find herself a widow several times over. When she is no longer young enough to find a suitable husband, she resorts to theft and is caught. Her sentence is to be sent to Virginia in the United States, and she persuades another man to accompany her and to be her husband. Together, they grow a successful tobacco plantation and are able to return to England under assumed names.

The next heroine is Clarissa, who appears in a novel of the same name written by Samuel Richardson. Clarissa is another heroine who refuses to submit to the will of her family and her society by agreeing to a loveless marriage. When she runs away with a man she finds attractive, she finds that his motives are vengeful and cruel. Although she eventually dies alone, she never compromises her convictions. Clarissa is yet another heroine who is strong and resolute but who pays dearly for her insistence on doing things her own way.

□Miss Bennett□ refers to the character Elizabeth Bennett from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth is a self-confident young woman who refuses to be impressed by the men her society believes should impress her. She is spirited, proud, cynical, and outspoken, and in the end she finds love in a most unexpected man. In her story, happiness in love comes to her in spite of herself.

After mentioning Miss Bennett, the speaker bids farewell to Miss Milner, whose story was introduced at the beginning of the poem. The next heroine is Isabel from Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. When Isabel arrives in England from America, she surprises everyone by rejecting suitable marriage proposals and instead marrying a man of no social standing or wealth. The more she gets to know of him, however, the more she realizes that he is manipulative and feels more disdain than love for her.

Despite opportunities to escape and seek a better life, Isabel is committed to being a good wife.

The final heroine in the speaker's list is Scarlett O'Hara from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Scarlett is another woman who makes foolish choices in love. Her fixation on one man renders her incapable of finding happiness with any other man, and her strong but doting husband eventually abandons her.

What is striking about these heroines, taken collectively, is that none of them finds happiness easily. Either they arrive at happiness by experiencing a difficult series of events, or they end up unhappy, tragically heartbroken, alone, or dead. These are stories from which the speaker in □The Art of the Novel□ might learn, but they are not stories she should embrace as being everything the world has to offer. In the poem, the speaker seems to come to a point where she suspects that these are enduring characters and novels *because* they are so tragic and flawed, not because they represent what is normal in the real world. The speaker's decision to put them all behind her is a decision of empowerment and hope. Although there is a great deal of risk involved, the risk is worth taking because staying immersed in the lives of these women, with all their suffering, denies her a chance to do better. When, at the end of the poem, the speaker effectively steps out of her car with its exhausted odometer, she is stepping out of the world of fiction. The highway she leaves behind is the limitations of the genre, which, however expansive and exciting, cannot really compare with the opportunities offered by the world. Realizing this, the speaker seeks the settings opposite the highway□□footpaths, or no paths, / and thickly wooded country, the moon.□

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on □The Art of the Novel,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Aubrey holds a PhD in English and has published many articles on contemporary poetry. In the following essay, Aubrey discusses the literary allusions in Sajé's poem.

Sajé is an engaging young poet who does unusual and unexpected things in her poems. Like □The Art of the Novel,□ many of the poems in her collection *Bend* contain literary or philosophical allusions that add extra layers of meaning or are simply used playfully by the poet. In □Marcel at the Station House,□ for example, Sajé imagines the French novelist Marcel Proust being questioned by the police about a crime he did not commit and giving some delightfully oblique, Proust-like answers. □Seven Types of Ambiguity□ is a reference to a well-known□at least to students of literature□book of that title written in 1930 by the literary critic William Empson. The title of the poem is no more than a wink to those in the know, since the poem itself makes no reference to the book. □The Art of the Novel□ is remarkable in terms of its allusions, since in a poem of only twenty-four lines, Sajé manages to pack in a total of twelve literary references.

The female speaker of the poem sounds rather like a graduate student in comparative literature, or perhaps a former graduate student, who has read everything put in front of her during graduate school as far as the novel and the theory of the novel are concerned. For many years, she has deeply loved this literary genre, identifying strongly with literary heroines and being drawn completely into their worlds as if they were her own. But now, having studied the novel and books about the novel and also having written about them□graduate school papers, perhaps□she has had enough. She declares that despite all she owes to novels (□you who made my world bigger□), she is never going to read another novel again□and that's final!

The poem is therefore at once a tribute to the power of novels to captivate and enthrall the reader and a decisive farewell to a literary genre that, as far as the speaker is concerned, has outlived its usefulness. She is clearly exasperated by the fate often meted out to the heroines of mostly eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. Her first three examples, which set the tone for the poem as a whole, allude to female characters whose lives end tragically. She gives pride of place to *A Simple Story*, by Elizabeth Inchbald, who published this minor novel in England in 1791. The heroine, the beautiful and vivacious Miss Milner (who is named in line 17 of □The Art of the Novel□) falls passionately in love with her guardian, a Catholic priest named Dorriforth. She regards this as a □fatal attraction□ and a □sacrilegious love□ and at first tries to hide it. In the meantime, Dorriforth inherits the title of Lord Elmwood and leaves the priesthood. When the truth of Miss Milner's love for him comes out, he falls in love with her, and they marry.

For four years they are happy, but then Lord Elmwood goes away for several years on business in the West Indies. Miss Milner, now Lady Elmwood, is distressed at his absence and has an affair with one of her former suitors. When her husband returns unexpectedly, she flees, guilt-stricken and in disgrace. Thereafter she lives a life of seclusion, devoid of all comforts, permanently estranged from her now vengeful

husband. After a long decline, she dies, still young, □ruined,□ as the speaker in □The Art of the Novel□ puts it, by her own recklessness and impatience. However, it is clear that the speaker has some argument with the word □ruin□ as applied to women who, for one reason or another, lose their good names in society: □Ruined. As if a woman were a building and love / centuries of bad weather.□

The next literary character mentioned by the speaker of the poem might also be considered □ruined.□ Lily Bart is the protagonist of Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* (1905). She is an attractive, unmarried woman of twenty-nine, who is financially ruined by her addiction to gambling at high-society parties. She never achieves her goal of marrying a wealthy man; instead, she ends up being shunned by upper-class society after false rumors are spread that she has had an extramarital affair. Lily then plunges down in social class. She takes jobs as a secretary and then as a milliner and lives in a boarding house. Although she just manages to pay off her debts, she is lonely and depressed, and one day she takes an overdose of sleeping medicine that kills her.

Emma Bovary, the protagonist of Gustave Flaubert's famous novel *Madame Bovary* (1857), is an even greater tragic heroine. Emma is a romantic young woman whose marriage to an unintelligent and tedious country doctor so disappoints her that she looks for love elsewhere. But after having two sordid and unsatisfactory affairs, her life goes into a downward spiral of despair, and she eventually commits suicide by swallowing arsenic. Emma indeed travels a □highway to hell,□ as the speaker of the poem characterizes it.

Why then do so many people enjoy reading this and other, similar novels? What is it about the □relentless bleakness□ (the speaker's words again) that draws the reader in? Why did the speaker so much enjoy □riding shotgun□ with these female characters on their harrowing highways to hell?

First, it should be pointed out that anyone who has ever read a good novel knows how easy it is to lose oneself in the fictional world that the author has created. This is particularly true in the case of novels that adhere to the principles of realism, in which the author tries to present life as it really is. As William James put it in his influential essay □The Art of Fiction□ (the title □The Art of the Novel□ may well be an allusion to this essay), □the air of reality . . . seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel□the merit on which all its other merits . . . helplessly and submissively depend.□ Even though realism is, in fact, an artfully created illusion, the reader is willingly drawn into the illusion. It is as if we are temporarily living in the world of the novel, which seems to represent life so faithfully. Moreover, as the Russian critic M. M. Bakhtin pointed out, this imaginative escape can be taken to an extreme, in which case □we might substitute for our own life an obsessive reading of novels, or dreams based on novelistic models□ (quoted by Jeremy Hawthorn in *Studying the Novel: An Introduction*). Bakhtin's comment puts in mind the □Years spent in a haze / of fiction, living through characters,□ which is how the speaker of □The Art of the Novel□ describes the period in which novels gripped her attention with such intensity.

Curiously, Emma Bovary in Flaubert's novel goes through a rather similar experience. She identifies so strongly with fictional models that she uses them to justify her own life. This happens when she feels guilty at having taken a lover and deceived her husband.

Then she recalled the heroines of the books that she had read, and the lyric legion of these adulterous women began to sing in her memory with the voice of sisters that charmed her. She became herself, as it were, an actual part of these imaginings, and realised the love-dream of her youth as she saw herself in this type of amorous women whom she had so envied.

Thus Emma, herself a fictional character, testifies to the power of fiction to fill the imagination and (as Bakhtin says) blur distinctions between real and fictional life, so strong is her need to identify with her chosen models.

With this in mind, return to the question of why the speaker of □The Art of the Novel□ (or any reader) so much enjoyed accompanying Miss Milner, Lily, and Emma on their fatal journeys. She herself addresses the point in the form of a question: □Did I like the relentless bleakness because Emma's not / me, or because she could be me?□

The way the question is posed puts in mind Aristotle's famous statement, in his *Poetics*, that the pleasure experienced by the audience at a tragic play is due to the release of two emotions, pity and fear. The audience feels pity because it watches the sufferings of someone else, the hero, whose misfortunes are greater than he deserves (this is the □not / me□ element in the poem's quoted lines). The second emotion, fear, arises from the realization that the character is much like ourselves and the same could happen to us (□she could be me□). Although Aristotle's comments, which have been much interpreted, were intended to apply to the drama, a similar process of empathic identification may well operate for the reader of a tragic novel and produce the same kind of pleasure.

The speaker of □The Art of the Novel□ hints at a second reason why the novel, which since the nineteenth century has been by far the most popular literary form, fascinated her for so long. The relevant phrase occurs at the end of the following lines: □you who made my world bigger and kept me on the beltway, / life transformed into destiny.□

A novel may be said to transform life into destiny in the sense that it imposes order and direction on the chaos and uncertainty of life. It creates a pattern of cause and effect, a pattern that in life is not always possible to discern. In a novel, the fates of the characters acquire a kind of inevitability, unlike the unknowableness of life. In life, the inner lives of others (and perhaps even our own) can never be fully understood, but a novelist like Flaubert can provide unerring insight into the smallest fluctuations of Emma Bovary's mind and emotions. Whereas life comes to us incomplete, its final outcomes always unknown, the novel presents life as destiny, a realized thing, leaving us to reflect on its significance and meaning.

The speaker of □The Art of the Novel□ does her own reflection on the novels she has in mind when she quotes the influential Russian literary critic Georg Lukács, who wrote in

his book *The Theory of the Novel* (first published in 1920) that the novel is □the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God.□ Lukács meant that the novel rose to prominence after the age of epic and romance, at a time when belief in the Christian God and a beneficent Providence were on the wane. As the world became in a sense meaningless, □man became lonely and could find meaning and substance only in his own soul, whose home was nowhere.□ The quotation is an apt comment on the tragic novels to which the speaker alludes.

Finally, the question arises, What has replaced the novel in the speaker's affection? The answer is contained in the final lines of the poem, □I now prefer footpaths, or no paths, / and thickly wooded country, the moon.□ In changing the metaphor from highways to footpaths, or no paths at all, she suggests that she is now satisfied by things less grand than the novel. She no longer feels drawn to a long prose narrative that tells a human story from hopeful beginnings to tragic ends. Instead, she prefers, perhaps, the alternative path of poetry, of sensory images plucked from the onrushing tide of life□not stories, but moments.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on □The Art of the Novel,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

□The Art of the Novel□ uses a lot of imagery□an eroding building, a mirror, a highway, numerous fictional characters, woods, and more. Create a multimedia presentation pairing images with the text of the poem. You may choose to do a PowerPoint presentation, for example, or create a sequence with video-editing software. The presentation should reflect not only the images of the poem but also the tone and emotional landscape of the speaker.

Choose one of the heroines named in the poem and write an essay relating the heroine's story to that of the poem's speaker. Look for similarities and differences between the heroine and the speaker and for compelling reasons why the poem's speaker has mentioned the character you chose.

Choose five people you know who enjoy reading fiction. Interview them about their personal histories with regard to reading and books, what reading means to them, and how their reading habits affect their lives. Summarize each interview and then see what conclusions you can draw about the ways people internalize the fiction they read. Present your findings in an article written for high-school English teachers.

Read Robert Frost's poem □The Road Not Taken.□ Pretend that you are a speaker who has been asked to talk to a class of graduating English majors and that you have decided to use both Frost's poem and Sajé's poem to encourage these students to take risks after graduation. Prepare your speech, along with any visuals or handouts you want to incorporate, and deliver your presentation to your English class.

What Do I Read Next?

Robin Behn's *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach* (1992) is a portable, self-contained work that aspiring poets may use to gain insight and guidance from numerous writing teachers. The book contains ninety exercises, along with essays to help the reader hone his or her craft.

In *Brave Dames and Wimpettes: What Women Are Really Doing on Page and Screen* (1999), the author Susan Isaacs lines up female characters like Jo March (from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*), Elizabeth Bennett (from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*), and the actress Katherine Hepburn (who played Jo March on-screen) to illustrate what makes a woman truly strong and independent. She contrasts this type of woman with characters such as Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary and the television character Ally McBeal, who are termed □wimpettes.□ By drawing from past and modern literature, film, and television, Isaacs provides a cultural image of womanhood.

Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble provide an overview of literary heroines in *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art* (1993). They show how female protagonists in this period are unique and how they influenced later heroines in fiction.

Sajé's *Red under the Skin* (1994) is her debut poetry collection. This volume won the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize, and critics found that it showed great promise.

Further Study

Burt, Daniel S., *Novel 100: A Ranking of the Greatest Novels of All Time*, Checkmark, 2003.

Burt undertakes the task of choosing and ranking the top one hundred novels in literary history. This book is meant to appeal to lovers of literature and to newcomers looking for an overview of classic fiction.

Ellmann, Richard, and Robert O'Clair, *Modern Poems: A Norton Introduction*, W. W. Norton, 1989.

One of the most respected publishers of literary anthologies offers this collection of works by 119 poets, along with essays about the poets and about reading poetry. The styles and perspectives of the poets are wide ranging, giving the reader a good grasp of modern poetry.

McKeon, Michael, *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

McKeon has compiled essays on various topics related to the novel and its place in history. The essays include important theoretical texts and essays by major literary critics and scholars.

Stendhal, Henri, *The Red and the Black*, Penguin Books, 2002.

This novel introduces Julien Sorel, considered to be one of the greatest characters in European literature. Driven by greed and hypocrisy, Sorel tries to ascend to the top of his society, only to bring about his own failure in the end.

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Sajé, Natasha, *Bend*, Tupelo Press, 2004, pp. 37, 48, 60.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

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:

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