Art Thou the Thing I Wanted Study Guide

Art Thou the Thing I Wanted by Alice Fulton

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

□Art Thou the Thing I Wanted,□ by Alice Fulton, was first published in 1990 in her collection *Powers of Congress* (reprinted in 2001) and was also published in 2004 in her larger collection *Cascade Experiment: Selected Poems*. □Art Thou the Thing I Wanted□ is a poem about longing, among many other things; one particular overtone focuses on how one accepts one's lot in life, and this acceptance in fact stands in opposition to longing. Each of these two opposing forces is subtly apparent in the poem's title, which suggests as well as questions that longing, as if the speaker is sure of neither her desire nor the object of her desire.

Fulton has stated that her writing revolves around words, and indeed, □Art Thou the Thing I Wanted□ provides a good example of how much fun Fulton has with language. She appears to like employing obscure vocabulary, often using words that might push her readers in surprising directions, as if she is enjoying a private joke. Her poems are playful□but the message underneath may be more serious. The emotions are hidden, waiting to be discovered, much like the □solutions□ that Fulton refers to in the poem. □Problems,□ one line asserts, are □more interesting than solutions.□ The situation may be similar for the poem itself: the wordplay and twists in meaning may be at least as interesting as the emotions they describe.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1952

Alice Fulton was born on January 25, 1952, in Troy, New York. She majored in creative writing as an undergraduate at Empire State College, in Saratoga Springs, New York, and then attended Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where she gained a master of fine arts in 1982. Since then, Fulton has taught writing at various schools, completing a long tenure at the University of Michigan and a year each at the University of California, Los Angeles, and at the University of California, Berkeley. In 2004, she was asked to join her alma mater Cornell, where she was given the Ann S. Bowers chair as distinguished professor of English.

Fulton has published several books of poetry, including *Palladium* (1982), winner of the 1985 National Poetry Series and the 1987 Society of Midland Authors Award; *Dance Script with Electric Ballerina* (1982), winner of the 1982 Associated Writing Programs Award; *Powers of Congress* (1990), in which the poem □Art Thou the Thing I Wanted□ first appeared; *Sensual Math* (1995); *Felt* (2001), her most famous work, for which she received the Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry from the Library of Congress in 2003; and *Cascade Experiment* (2004), a compilation encompassing works from each of her first five collections. She also has published a collection of prose essays about poetry called *Feeling as a Foreign Language: The Good Strangeness of Poetry* (1999). In addition, Fulton's work has been honored by inclusion in five editions of the annual series *The Best American Poetry* and was also published in the 1988-1997 edition of *The Best of the Best American Poetry*. Fulton has won what is colloquially referred to as the □genius□ award, a fellowship given by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to people who have shown extraordinary originality in their creative pursuits. Fulton also has won awards for the quality of her teaching.

Plot Summary

Stanzas 1-2

□Art Thou the Thing I Wanted□ begins with the line □These unprepossessing sunsets.□ The soft, sibilant *s*, constituting noteworthy consonance here, is used heavily throughout the poem. □Unprepossessing,□ one of Fulton's many uncommon word choices, means □unattractive,□ or □not noteworthy,□ a perhaps unexpected descriptor for □sunsets.□ Next come □aluminum-sided acres,□ which, together with the sunsets, □retain us like problems / more interesting than solutions.□ A restatement of these lines may be that worrying about and solving problems can sometimes be more fascinating than the actual solutions.

The second stanza continues the thought (and sentence) of the first stanza: the solutions are likened to □perfect / lots of condos,□ where □lot□ is used as a noun; modern condominiums, one should note, typically have outer shells of aluminum siding. Here, the reader realizes that the solutions are not simply □perfect,□ as the last line of the first stanza might seem to say; rather, the lots of condos are □perfect,□ as in, perhaps, perfectly arranged. The □groomed weather / of elsewhere□ may refer to the artificially heated or cooled rooms inside the condos. The clause, □we must love / what we're given,□ may mean that one learns to appreciate one's environment, however unattractive it may be. Indeed, □home□ (referred to at the beginning of stanza 3), one's original environment, is described as a □steel-wool firmament.□ Steel wool, an abrasive, is used to scrape things clean, while the word □firmament□ is typically used in reference to the sky or the heavens; thus, □home□ is perhaps framed as an idealized but in truth abrasive place.

Stanzas 3-5

□Home□ is next described as □the nearest / partition between us and what,□ where □what□ perhaps refers to all that is unknown. That is, one's house is one's primary protection from the outside world. As such, the home is a sort of sanctuary, and, naturally, □we choose to find it peerless,□ or one comes to believe in one's home as an ideal place, whatever it truly is. The next sentence, beginning with □And maybe why,□ may be read as an addition to the remark in stanza 2 that begins □which is why.□ Thus, in the same way that □we get stuck / on the steel-wool firmament / of home,□ we also □wish / to lean our heads on the dense rocking / in a particular chest.□ The narrator implies that both home and a particular person can come to be seen as partitions from the outside world. The □rocking□ is presumably a reference to the sound of the heart, which, in turn, is compared to the sound of ocean waves as well as to □a singular wind.□ That □singular wind,□ which □swarms where that heart begins,□ is the source of a type of power or attraction, drawing two people together□the one listening to the sound of the heart and the one who possesses that heart.

The person who owns that heart is then likened to □a passing friend□ who □becomes a mascot in our lives,□ where a mascot may perhaps be considered an artificial source of inspiration. Indeed, continuously thinking about this friend comes to affect one □like a high pollen count.□ That is, these thoughts act as a mild irritant, causing a discomforting reaction. The fifth stanza ends □*Having a crush* is the expression,□ confirming that the narrator is referring to infatuation with another person, which, like allergens in the air, can cause a sense of suffocation of the self. One's mind is filled only with thoughts of the other.

Stanzas 6-9

In stanza 6, the speaker continues to explore the feeling of being infatuated. She adds that one becomes constrained by □chaperones,□ or people watching over. That is, a friend (□chaperone□) might note that the object of one's affection has, in an inebriated state, passed along a greeting. This greeting is then accepted by the person with the crush as □a secular blessing□; she even glows at the news. The next line, □Glorious things of thee are spoken!□ may be ironically self-referential, as one might refer to oneself in the second person, perhaps mockingly, while looking in a mirror. The next lines read, □There should be a word for you / muses of unreason,□ where the narrator is presumably referring to the objects of crushes, who can foster irrationality in those who are infatuated with them. The narrator then compares the object of a crush to a □vector,□ which is first defined, in its mathematical sense, as something that gives direction but does not truly exist. The word is then defined as a □carrier / of infection,□ such as an insect or a virus, again denoting the negative aspects of having a crush on someone.

The speaker then further investigates the workings of her mind, again referring to the obsessive nature of thoughts about a crush. The territory that her mind is circling, like a jet above an imagined runway, is □unfavorable terrain.□ The circling itself is done in search of □easement,□ which can mean □the release of tension□ or also □the limited use of another's property□; both of these meanings may have relevance here. The next lines read, □Yet we like to be immersed, no sweat, in solutions / cooler than 98.6 degrees.□ The term □solutions□ likely refers back to the problem-and-solution puzzle of the first stanza as well as to liquids, like chemical solutions; the normal temperature of a healthy human body, of course, is 98.6 degrees. That is, perhaps, one might often choose to immerse oneself in situations that are not realistically sustainable; thus, one submits oneself to □the lure of fantasy□ and harbors thoughts about a situation that may never come to pass, such as being united with one's crush.

Stanzas 10-12

The last line of stanza 9, □'You never wanted,' people say accusingly,□ invokes one of the words from the title of the poem. To □want□ may mean to □desire□ or to □be in need□; that is, others may be upset in believing that the narrator had found satisfaction in abundance, while, perhaps, the narrator herself realizes that in striking a □bargain□

to obtain whatever abundance she has obtained, she has sacrificed something. She then remarks that whatever, or whoever, comes to live □here□ learns to □live without / certain fertile perqs.□ □Perqs□ is likely a respelling of □perks,□ which originally comes from the word □perquisites.□ □Burrs,□ meanwhile, are prickly growths that attach to the fur of animals so as to transport seeds to new locations, allowing the plant whence the burr originated to produce a sort of □offspring□ elsewhere. Thus, if a burr is embedded in infertile □clay,□ its existence has come to naught.

At the □here□ mentioned in stanza 10, where the narrator herself presumably lives, can be found □high-tension wires,□ such as electric wires, which bear □rules,□ perhaps referring to both □straight lines□ and □regulations.□ The poles that hold those wires are referred to as □Eiffels,□ where the Eiffel Tower, in Paris, in fact itself serves as a radio tower; many may have originally seen the crude, metallic design of the Eiffel Tower to be □harsh.□ Yet the residents eventually become used to these □eyesores,□ as the utility poles □become / backdrops□ and are later □unseen.□ That is, these originally objectionably intrusive poles are accepted, however insidious they might remain. Even when one tower topples to the ground and scorches □the field,□ it does so □without a sign / of flinch,□ denoting the desensitizing/desensitized nature of the poles' presence. Then the reader is told that □the elder / out back up and tumbled.□ That is, an older something that could be found, say, in the backyard, perhaps, fell over.

Stanzas 13-16

As described in stanza 13, the elder from the preceding stanza is understood to be a tree that tumbled of its own accord. In that the tree fell as if willingly□just as a lover who is □besotted□ or □infatuated□ or □made dull□ would willingly drape herself on the arm of one who cares little about her□its appearance is all the □more frightening.□ However, by the fourteenth stanza, the fallen tree, □devoured by some tree disease,□ is barely even noticed, just like the utility poles. In fact, in its state of suspended death, the tree is seen to fit in with its surroundings, that is, small farms, defeated by big agricultural businesses, that are themselves likewise held in a state of suspended death. Indeed, several other images, for example, the decrepit trucks, the unused tire swing, and the sign referring to a dog that no longer exists, all harmonize with the image of the fallen tree, which is then said to be □on its knees,□ perhaps as if begging for mercy. The final lines of the sixteenth stanza read, □Like others, / I mistake whatever is / for what is natural.□ In other words, the narrator accepts her present surroundings, however insidious or decrepit, as what she is meant to be surrounded by; the narrator perhaps has a strong acceptance of what she sees as her fate. If people simply accept their surroundings, the narrator suggests here, they are settling for a reality that is, in fact, not □natural.□

Stanzas 17-19

In stanzas 17 and 18, the narrator gives examples of how people come to expect whatever the present reality happens to be. The □invisible / engines□ may be any of

the various vibrations that exist in city life. In the closing lines of stanza 18, the speaker turns to a personal address, as if talking to the object of her own infatuation. Even the land reminds her of this person, whether the land around her or someplace else. She then refers to the prairie, which is often a symbol of the infancy of America, before farms took over the vast heartland. She states that □on the remains of prairie,□ the earth becomes a □plinth,□ a □base□ or □foundation.□ On that plinth, □we rise, towers / of blood and ignorance.□

Themes

Wanting

The theme of wanting is introduced in the title of the poem, as the narrator questions whether she truly desires the poem's □thou.□ In the second stanza, the narrator states, □we must love / what we're given,□ where love can be seen as another aspect of want; that is, one comes to want whatever one is given. This theme is pursued further in the third stanza, where the wanting of a particular something develops into a kind of □partition between us and what.□ This partition could be likened to a form of protection between a person and the outside world or between a person and his or her inner conflicts. This wanting, this expecting to find □solutions□ in this partition, makes one feel eminently protected. The object of one's wanting might be compared to a drug, which might provide a false sense of satisfaction. In fact, three lines of the poem read, □The thought of this anybody / affects us like a high / pollen count, inspiring a suffering□; in ending the second of those lines on the word □high,□ the poet suggests the □state of elation□ most typically associated with drugs as well as with athletic endeavors and spiritual euphoria. Thus the person who *wants* becomes addicted to the object of a crush, who he or she comes to believe is the solution to life's problems. This thought was developed earlier with the image of a person leaning his or her head against another person's chest □as if the only / ocean lives there.□ Indeed, the wanting of fulfillment from the object of one's desires makes one falsely believe that the entire world revolves around this object, producing a □petty□ sort of □suffering.□

Conversely, in stanza 9, people accuse the narrator of having □never wanted.□ The precise meaning of this passage is debatable, as this particular wanting may or may not be the same as the wanting alluded to throughout the poem. Here, people may be accusing the narrator of having never been in need of anything, materially speaking, as suggested by the □glut□ of stanza 10. At this point, the narrator refers to the place where she lives: □what comes to live here,□ she says, □comes to live without / certain fertile perqs.□ That is, she talks about living in a world in which one learns to adjust to what is given, a world in which people believe that they can do what they are doing only at that moment, without considering what they may have done in the past or might do in the future. She speaks of a world without the sort of wanting that can be motivational rather than detrimental, and this world is certainly portrayed in a negative light.

Acceptance

In many ways, acceptance is the opposite of wanting, and indeed, the opposite of wanting is itself a major theme in Fulton's poem. With wanting, one desires something. One dreams about having more of something good or less of something negative. With acceptance, one simply takes what one is given. The narrator introduces the theme of acceptance in referring to □glut,□ which some people equate with □gladness.□ She continues by describing the ugliness (or at least lack of beauty) where she lives, with

□harsh Eiffels□ (or utility poles or tension-wire towers), which she calls □eyesores,□ eventually blurring into the background of the residents' view. Even when the grass sizzles from fallen electrical lines or when an old tree collapses onto a barn, the eye quickly forgets that these eyesores exist; the scene is soon regarded as □normal.□ The narrator mentions the rundown farms, the broken machinery, the old tire in which □rusty geraniums□ are growing, and a dog who is no longer there. All of these things, perhaps, are in part the result of big □agri-biz□ coming into town and taking over the economy, leading to poverty and possibly a loss of livelihood. The tree rests □metaphorically / on its knees,□ the speaker says, as if in supplication. People believe that women can only perform □detail work□ because that is the only kind of work they are ever given. The poem notes an absence of a sense of fight. Things happen, and people just accept them.

Discomfort

Fulton's poem conveys a sense of discomfort, sometimes through implication and at other times through metaphor. The opening phrase features the word □unprepossessing,□ which refers to something making an unfavorable impression. The phrase □aluminum-sided acres□ conjures an image of being surrounded by metal. The narrator notes that □we get stuck / on the steel-wool firmament,□ referring to metal, once again, as well as to abrasiveness. The effects of infatuation are likened to the inhaling of pollen and the allergic reaction produced. The narrator mentions □brown negligence,□ suggesting decay; □high-tension / wires,□ implying frustration; and □quivering□ that is □constant,□ as with irritation. That is, perhaps, the narrator is feeling discomfort and therefore sees it wherever she looks and points it out so that the reader will understand what she is going through.

Style

Alliteration

Someone interested in language often has sensitivity to the sounds of words. Fulton makes notable use of alliteration, the repetition of a sound at the beginnings of consecutive words, and consonance, the repetition of a sound throughout words. The title features the phrase □thou the thing.□ In the first line of the poem, the sibilant *s* is present in each of the three words. In the second line of the second stanza, □of elsewhere. Well, we must love,□ the letter *w* is repeated three times. In the lines that follow, the letter is repeated six more times at the beginnings of words. Reading the stanza aloud, one can feel the emphasis produced by the repetition of this sound and realize its power. The letter *w* is again employed in repetition in stanza 3, with □why we wish.□ Other examples of alliteration and consonance can be found throughout the poem.

Similes

Similes provide images for the mind in comparing two different things, specifically using the words □like□ and □as□ (whereas metaphors do not use those words), thus allowing the reader a greater degree of understanding. In Fulton's poem, in the first stanza, she writes that □aluminum-sided acres / retain us like problems.□ That is, the □aluminum-sided acres□ can hold on to a person the way a problem can hold on to a person; the phrase is fairly simple, but its meaning can be long pondered. Indeed, the poet has left the comparison somewhat open-ended, leaving the reader to conjure his or her own interpretation. In stanza 5, the poem reads, □The thought of this anybody / affects us like a high / pollen count.□ This unique comparison aptly denotes the feeling that the poet is attempting to share, especially for those who have experienced allergies. In stanzas 8 and 9, the poem reads, □Don't we resent / the way our minds circle / unfavorable terrain for easement, / like jets above imagined runways?□ Once this complicated simile is grasped, the image is quite effective. One can imagine those times when a thought is so worrisome that one simply cannot stop thinking about it. One can then imagine a pilot circling a dangerous field, looking for a runway that exists only in his or her mind. Thus, the poet paints a picture for the reader, allowing a deeper understanding of her pattern of thought.

Wordplay

One common element of postmodernist writing is wordplay. Fulton often employs words in ways that allow for multiple interpretations, often where one connotation is first understood, to be supplanted by a second connotation that can be understood only upon the reading of a subsequent line. In the first stanza, for instance, the last line reads as if it is complete: □solutions being perfect.□ In the context, the poem seems to

be saying that problems are more interesting than solutions, as solutions are simply perfect. Yet no punctuation is placed after the word □perfect,□ such that the second stanza must be read as a continuation of that thought. The phrase in its entirety then reads, □solutions being perfect / lots of condos.□ As such, the phrase bears a substantially different meaning. A similar play on words occurs in the fifth stanza: □The thought of this anybody / affects us like a high.□ The word □high□ ends the second line, and the phrase sounds complete until the reader continues to the third line, where the words □pollen count□ complete the phrase. The idea of thoughts acting □like a high□ is much different from that of thoughts acting □like a high / pollen count.□ Still, both connotations are relevant to the overall meaning of the poem.

In stanza 9, the reader again finds the word □solutions,□ which was used in the first stanza strictly to refer to the solving of a problem; in its later usage, both this first meaning and a second, □liquids,□ are implied. □High-tension□ can refer both to the □tightness□ of the wires and to emotional tension. In stanza 15, the narrator refers to the pickup trucks as □wilted□ and the geraniums as □rusty,□ reversing the placement of adjectives that the reader might otherwise expect. In stanza 16, the first line, □the tree looked right,□ bears a different meaning alone than it does in conjunction with the second line: □the tree looked right / at home.□ The next line concludes that the tree is □on its knees.□ Although the following words, □Like others,□ are part of a separate sentence, their placement after the previous phrase leads the reader's mind to connect them. That is, perhaps, the reader is left with the image that □others,□ maybe trees or neighbors, also are on their knees. In such ways, the poet plays with her readers, twisting and contorting the meanings of her words through their minds.

Historical Context

Postmodernism

Postmodernism, a movement that has influenced literature in the latter part of the twentieth century, has been defined as both a reaction against and a refinement of modernism. Some of the key elements of modernism in literature have been identified as experimentation, an emphasis on the individual and his or her perceptions, and a focus on rational thinking as opposed to the emotions. (Emotional writing was one focal point in literature during the Romantic period, a precursor to modernism.) The modernism movement is said to fall roughly between the 1860s and the 1970s. In the United States, the period is often limited to the first part of the twentieth century, up to about 1970. The British author Virginia Woolf is considered a modernist. She tended to write in a stream-of-consciousness mode (as in *To the Lighthouse*, published in 1927) in which the reader was privileged to the characters' interior monologues as they reacted to events around them. The American E. E. Cummings, who delivered a commencement address on modernism upon graduating from Harvard, broke many conventions of traditional poetry, as exemplified by his poem □n(o)w.□ Modernists tended to challenge tradition.

Postmodernism began as early as the 1920s, gaining momentum in the United States especially after World War II. One of the key elements of postmodernism is a sense of play, as opposed to seriousness. This can be seen in Fulton's poem and her play with words. A sense of play is also typically evident in postmodernist writing in the forms of irony, textual manipulation, and paradox, accentuating the concept that meaning is not simply rooted in words. Indeed, postmodernists tend to believe that truth, ethics, and beauty are rooted in individual perception. Since postmodernism is sometimes defined as a furthering of modernism, characteristics of modernist literature are also found in postmodernist literature, and distinguishing between the two movements is sometimes difficult. Writers associated with the postmodern movement include the novelists Don DeLillo, author of *White Noise* (1991); Toni Morrison, author of *Beloved* (1994); and Salman Rushdie, author of *Midnight's Children* (1995). Various poems often classified as postmodernist include Amy Gerstler's □Bzzzzzzz,□ John Ashbery's □Paradoxes and Oxymorons,□ and Allen Ginsberg's □Howl.□

Emily Dickinson

Fulton has stated that Emily Dickinson, one of her favorite poets, has had a profound effect on her life as well as on her writing. She began reading Dickinson as an adolescent and found much comfort in her poetry; she was especially impressed by the emotions displayed by Dickinson in her poems. Dickinson made unusual use of punctuation, especially the dash, and capitalization. The subject matter of □Art Thou the Thing I Wanted□ can be likened to Dickinson's □Proud of My Broken Heart,□ □To Lose Thee,□ and □It's Such a Little Thing,□ all of which focus on love gained and love lost.

Above all, Fulton certainly drew upon a poem by Dickinson titled, almost identically, □Art Thou the Thing I Wanted?□ Another primary aspect of postmodernism is the reconstruction of established works. (For example, Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* is in effect a retelling of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*.) Dickinson's work essentially consists of two drafts of a single eight-line poem, with many words and phrases identical in both drafts; in changing certain words, however, the second draft is given a meaning drastically different from that of the first. Together, the drafts can be seen as constituting a meditation on the positive and negative aspects of the state of wanting. Thus, Fulton's poem can be seen as a revisitation of concepts introduced by Dickinson more than a century earlier.

Critical Overview

Fulton's □Art Thou the Thing I Wanted□ was originally published in the collection *Powers of Congress*, which was reviewed by several publications with mixed reception. A critic for *Publishers Weekly* states, □Although Fulton . . . possesses a keen sense of the pliability of language, her imagery is often incoherent or heavy-handed.□ Indeed, many reviewers have referred to Fulton's ability to deftly handle and have fun with language, and not all have liked the effect. The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer finds that she has □sacrificed the emotionality of her subject to the bravado of wordplay.□

Another critic, Eavan Boland, writing for *Partisan Review*, finds Fulton to be □an ambitious, powerful poet.□ Boland goes on to say that Fulton's poems □are daring and broad. She will try anything; and the latest thing she has tried is neither proof nor promise of the next.□ Boland adds, □Her language is not always certain and her tone is occasionally too much the same from poem to poem, making for an occasional lack of freshness and variety.□ She concludes, □These flaws need not disguise her considerable skill and the real pleasures of *Powers of Congress*.

Mutlu Konuk Blasing, writing for the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, finds fault with Fulton's lack of connection with the reader: □Fulton's voice is never intimate: her volume is turned just a notch too high and tends, at times, to overshoot the inner ear.□ Blasing further describes the nature of Fulton's expression thus:

Her voice is public, and she usually speaks as 'we'; even when she uses 'I,' her experience is either representative or meant to instruct or illustrate some larger truth□about how 'we' experience, feel, behave, or should behave.

Blasing also mentions Fulton's use of wordplay:

Fulton is polished in what she does, and her flash hooks the reader. On the down side, she can be breezy and even facile. Her language has very little undertow; her accomplished verbal play, for example, is on display and never gives a sense of making a connection that might have taken the speaker herself by surprise as well as the reader.

Finally, in a review for the *Library Journal*, Kathleen Norris notes, □These are intense, fast-moving but oddly abstracted poems□ that suffer from □overwrought language.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Hart is a published writer and former teacher. In this essay, she explores the emotions that are carefully hidden in Fulton's playful poem.

Fulton's poem □Art Thou the Thing I Wanted□ contains many playful images and poetic wordplay, while seldom approaching overt emotional expression. Still, as with the work of one of the poet's favorite writers, Emily Dickinson, Fulton's poem is indeed inspired by deep sentiments. Hidden beneath the clever wordplay and somewhat lighthearted similes is a heart that has been hurt and is longing to heal. Indeed, from the title, the reader might suspect that the speaker of this poem is in a quandary. The verb in the title is in the past tense, so the narrator can be understood to be looking back on a situation, recollecting and sorting through her feelings, and reflecting on the overall experience. At one time, the speaker thought she wanted something or someone; now, she is pondering those emotions, trying to determine whether they were real.

If by the word □unprepossessing□ in the poem's first stanza the narrator means □unattractive□ or □unappealing,□ she could be perceiving what she once considered romantic (as sunsets often are) as a source of sadness. The sunsets might have once made her feel as if she were experiencing love; yet in looking back on the situation, she believes that she was merely experiencing an infatuation. This concept of mistaken love is underscored in the artificial environments described in the second stanza. The feelings she had for the person, who is given no more identity than the □thou□ of the title, may have been as unreal as □the groomed weather / of elsewhere□ that is pumped artificially into the condos of the poem.

Love is first mentioned in the second stanza, in a statement that reveals some of the negative sentiments that the narrator might have about love. First, she uses the imperative □must,□ as in, □Well, we must love.□ The second clue that her emotions might be amiss is the fact that she states that this imperative love is being applied to something □given,□ not something that she has chosen□and that □is why / we get stuck.□ She then examines that love more closely, likening it to a □partition between us and what.□ Her love, or perhaps the object of her love, feels like protection from everything that the □what□ in this phrase represents□perhaps the outside world, perhaps her interior world. Regardless, in her involvement in loving, she feels more secure, and this sense of security glosses over everything else that might reveal the flaws inherent in both her love and her beloved. □We choose to find it peerless□ nonetheless, the narrator states, probably referring to the notion that if one feels comfortable with something, one may fail to examine it too closely for fear of finding something wrong with it.

The speaker then focuses more specifically on the beloved, whom she represents first as □a particular chest,□ then as □a passing friend,□ and then as □a mascot.□ None of these representations is very substantial. A chest is just a body part; □a passing friend□ implies a surface relationship; and a mascot, merely a symbol, is essentially as superfluous as a superstition or a lucky charm. In the fifth stanza, the lover becomes

□this anybody,□ another phrase suggesting insignificance. The inconsequentiality of the whole affair that the speaker is exploring is further played with in the fifth stanza: □this anybody / affects us like a high / pollen count.□ The poet has written this phrase quite mischievously, first suggesting that the relationship provides some kind of □high□ in ending the line after that word and then completing the phrase and shifting the meaning; even with the alternately negative connotation of the high pollen count, the speaker dismisses the □suffering□ by calling it not lethal but □petty.□

At the end of stanza 5, the narrator finally describes the relationship in question as a □crush□ □an infatuation that leads her to □glow□ when someone tells her, □Your favorite so-and-so got drunk / and said to say hello.□ The fact that the object of the narrator's crush was inebriated implies that he may have lost his inhibition as well as a sense of doing the right thing, such as, perhaps, by not leading the narrator on. Here, for the first time, the narrator adopts a tone of facetiousness, exclaiming, □Glorious things of thee are spoken!□ Whether the □thee□ is the narrator herself or the object of her crush, she seems to be mocking the gravity with which one's attention for the other was regarded. She then uses the word □resent□ in reference to the way her mind circles □unfavorable terrain,□ implying that she is tired of allowing herself to always harbor thoughts about the object of her crush.

In stanza 9, □people□ accuse the speaker of never wanting. She refutes this indirectly by stating that the fact that she does not have a lot of things does not mean she has no desires. The reference to □a bargain struck□ implies compromise, which the speaker likewise perhaps regrets. Continuing to see pitiable reflections of herself in her surroundings, she projects the image of a □besotted lover□ onto the fallen tree. Indeed, the image is frightening to her, as she may be reminded of what she once was: a woman completely obsessed with another person. The last lines in stanza 16 read, □Like others, / I mistake whatever is / for what is natural.□ This statement is made following the description of the rundown neighborhood of small farms, which agricultural corporations have essentially ruined. The wrecked trucks and □make-do neighborhood,□ then, look natural because the people have grown accustomed to their state of want. The narrator seems to be saying that when she found herself in a state of infatuation that was mentally harmful to her, she nevertheless grew accustomed to the associated sentiments and came to believe that that sort of desperate, irrational wanting was somehow positive.

In reflecting, the narrator may or may not have truly moved on from her crush. Residual emotions are certainly evident, and the title of this poem is a question, but that question lacks the closing punctuation that would make it a true question. The narrator states in the eighteenth stanza, □anything reminds me of you: the real estate / most local, most removed.□ Thus, perhaps, no matter where she goes, she thinks of the lost, or abandoned, crush. She refers to herself and others as towers, leading the reader's mind back to the □harsh Eiffels□ of stanza 11. The utility towers were held together by □high-tension / wires,□ just as the narrator and her crush are connected by the wires of emotion. They are, she continues, □towers / of blood and ignorance.□ The reader then wonders what, precisely, these people are ignorant about. Did they not understand each other? Or did they not comprehend their own emotions? In the title, the speaker

suggests that she remains uncertain as to whether she wanted the □thou□ in question, yet she equates the □thou□ to a □thing,□ or an object. If the person is reduced to an object, the poem may indeed be more about the wanting, or about her specific emotions, than about the object that inspired them. Therefore, the ignorance might indeed relate mostly to the feelings that the speaker is trying to sort through, as might the poem as a whole.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on □Art Thou the Thing I Wanted,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Read two other poems of Fulton's from her collection *Powers of Congress*; find and list all the examples of wordplay in the poems. Then write a short poem of your own using similar wordplay.

Using any part of □Art Thou the Thing I Wanted□ as inspiration, complete a sketch or painting. For example, paint a picture of what you think the fallen tree from stanza 13 might look like.

Research the effect of large agricultural businesses on small family farms in the United States. How has the agriculture industry changed in the past two or three decades? If you live in a farming community, interview local farmers to personalize your research; alternatively, find and interview large-scale gardeners in your city. Present your findings to your class.

Find examples of postmodernist thought in various fields, such as art, literature, philosophy, science, religion, or political science. Can consensus be found on a definition of postmodernism? How do you see the effects of postmodernism represented in culture, in news stories, on television, and in music? Present your findings to your class.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: According to U.S. Census reports, the number of small farms (of 1 to 9 acres) is about 187,000; middle-sized farms (50 to 179 acres), 712,000; and large farms (2,000 acres or more), 64,000.

Today: According to U.S. Census reports, the number of small farms is about 179,000; middle-sized farms, 659,000; and large farms, 78,000.

1980s: According to the USDA Forest Service, the majority of the land in the Midwest is devoted to agriculture.

Today: Although the majority of land in the Midwest is still devoted to agriculture, the amount of urban space has increased by 23.4 percent since the 1980s.

1980s: According to U.S. statistics, the percentage of the population that is divorced rises from 6 percent at the start of the decade to 8 percent by the end of the decade.

Today: According to U.S. statistics, by the turn of the century, 10 percent of the population is divorced.

What Do I Read Next?

Fulton's *Cascade Experiment: Selected Poems* (2004) is a compilation of poems from her first five collections, including *Powers of Congress* (1990) and the award-winning *Felt* (2002). The book offers a great overview of the author's progression from the more simple poems of her early years to the newer and more complex; throughout the collection, Fulton becomes more experimental with language as she digs deeper into her emotional world.

Besides writing poetry, Fulton teaches and writes essays. In *Feeling as a Foreign Language: The Good Strangeness of Poetry* (1999), she writes about the poetic process and the various forms of postmodern poetry, and she also examines Emily Dickinson's work. Fulton devotes a section of this book to reflections on her own work.

Emily Dickinson, one of the most celebrated of American poets, is often mentioned in discussions about Fulton. The two poets' works indeed feature similarities, which Fulton has herself pointed out. To discover these similarities, *Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1988) is a good place to start.

I Never Came to You in White (1996) is Judith Farr's fictionalized account of Emily Dickinson's life, focusing on some of the poet's idiosyncrasies. Farr tells her story through letters and poetry that she imagines Dickinson might have written.

B. H. Fairchild was the 2004 winner of the Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry, which Fulton won in 2003. Fairchild's collection *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest* (2003) has a midwestern flavor not unlike that found in Fulton's work.

Further Study

Addonizio, Kim, and Dorianne Laux, *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*, W. W. Norton, 1997.

This book, written by two published poets, comes highly recommended for students who want to explore their own abilities to write poetry. The authors' advice addresses subjects about which to write, the craft of writing, and the things that might distract one from writing.

Butler, Christopher, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

This is a very readable, accessible, and short introduction to the basic tenets of postmodernism, with a particular focus on how the movement is defined in art, philosophy, politics, and ethics.

Henry, Brian, and Andrew Zawacki, eds., *The Verse Book of Interviews: 27 Poets on Language, Craft & Culture*, Verse Press, 2005.

This volume contains interviews with working poets collected by the publication *Verse* over the years. American as well as international poets offer their insights on their art.

Mayes, Frances, *The Discovery of Poetry: A Field Guide to Reading and Writing Poems*, Harvest Books, 2001.

This book can help readers understand the nature of poetry. Mayes, best known for her novel *Under the Tuscan Sun*, which was made into a movie, also teaches creative writing; in this volume are several essays taken from her teaching experience.

Paz, Octavio, *The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry*, Harvest Books, 1992.

The Nobel Prize-winning Mexican poet Octavio Paz is highly praised for his analysis of modern poetry. In this collection, he helps readers understand poetry's political, social, and cultural roles.

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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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