Astonishment Study Guide

Astonishment by Wisława Szymborska

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Introduction

Wislawa Szymborska's "Astonishment," also translated as "Wonderment," is a simple, sixteen-line poem in which the poet asks a series of questions about why she exists in this world in the form that she does. The deeply philosophical poem poses ten questions about the human self, a person's place in the world, and the nature of existence, but it offers no answers to these puzzles. Rather, there is some suggestion that these metaphysical questions cannot be answered at all, and that the best response to the complex and inscrutable world is one of astonishment because the act of asking questions does not get one closer to unraveling the mysteries of existence.

Szymborska published the poem in 1972 in *Wszelki wypadek* (*Could Have*), a collection in which the poet tackles philosophical issues as they relate to everyday life. Like other pieces in that volume, "Astonishment" is a deceptively simple work that elicits more questions than it explicitly poses and makes readers aware of the richness, sadness, mystery, and dark joy of being human. The straightforward language, commonplace images, and clean form of the poem work together to create a sense of an accessible, ordinary world that is nevertheless enormously complex and difficult to understand. As with most of Szymborska's poetry, little has been written about "Astonishment," but the work is of particular interest because it echoes many of the remarks made by the poet in her 1996 Nobel lecture. In that speech, the poet talks about the reaction of astonishment to the unfathomable nature of the world. Thus, the poem tackles a subject that is central to the poet's work, introducing concerns about what can be known, the nature of existence, and the status of human beings that figure prominently in her other writings.

Author Biography

Szymborska was born in Kornik in western Poland on July 2, 1923. In 1931, her family moved to Krakow. During World War II, when Germany occupied Poland, Szymborska attended school illegally. In March 1945, she published her first poem, "Szukam slowa" ("I am Looking for a Word") in the daily *Dziennik Polski*. Later that year, she began a course of study in Polish literature and sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, which she completed in 1948. She also finished her first collection of poetry that year, but the book was not published because the ruling Communist party in Poland found the work too complex and bourgeois. She revised the work to make it more political, and it was published in 1952 as *Dlatego zyjemy* (*That's What We Live For*). Szymborska was later to disavow the political position she took in this and other early socialist-realist verse. From 1953 to 1981, Szymborska worked on the Krakow literary weekly *Zycie Literacia* (*Literary Life*) as poetry editor and wrote a weekly column. Her columns were later collected in several volumes under the title *Lektury nadobowiazkowe* (*Optional Readings*).

While she worked at *Zycie Literacia*, Szymborska's reputation in Poland grew steadily, although she remained an intensely private person. She published poetry, won national and international prizes, and traveled abroad to read and discuss her work. She published several slim volumes of verse during this time, including the 1972 work *Wszelki wypadek* (*Could Have*) in which "Astonishment" first appeared. The collection of twentyseven poems explores the diversity, plenitude, and richness of everyday life, which for the poet is a source of astonishment and inspires metaphysical questions. Like most of her mature work, the poems in the volume are not political and philosophically skeptical in tone.

In 1981, Szymborska resigned from *Zycie Literacia* and joined the editorial staff of the monthly magazine *Pismo*. She continued to write poetry and essays, translated French poetry, and gained influence in Poland's literary circle as well as its underground press. In 1991, Szymborska won the Goethe Prize and in 1995, she was awarded the Herder Prize and received an honorary doctor of letters degree from Poznan University. In 1996, she received the Nobel Prize for literature. The Nobel Committee called her work "poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality." Szymborska has written that winning the Nobel Prize at age seventy-three came as a shock to her. A shy and self-effacing person, she was uncomfortable at being suddenly thrust into the limelight and besieged by reporters. Although she continues to publish and remains a force in Polish literary circles, Szymborska shies away from interviews and media attention and lives a quiet life in Krakow.

Plot Summary

Title

"Astonishment" was written in 1972, but the main ideas of the poem are echoed in much of Szymborska's earlier and later work as well. The notion of "astonishment" or wonderment at the complexity of the universe is seen in much of her poetry as the poet looks with curiosity, awe, sadness, and even joy at the contingency of human existence and the place humans occupy in the universe. In her 1996 Nobel lecture, Szymborska talks about inspiration, which she says is "born from a continuous 'I don't know.'" Poets are not the only ones whom inspiration visits, she says□inspiration comes to doctors, teachers, and gardeners as well□but genuine poets must keep repeating the phrase "I don't know," and each poem marks an effort to try to know, which the poet inevitably finds cannot be satisfactorily done. The poet looks around at the world, she says, and ultimately does not know what to think or make of it. The world is incredible in its vastness, and human beings, as all animals, are but specks in this "measureless theater." Human life is laughably short and bounded by two arbitrary dates of life and death. But, Szymborska says, whatever else humans might think, know, or not know about this world, "it is astonishing." And what is interesting is that the world is not astonishing because it deviates from some norm humans know, but it is simply astonishing per se, even though there is nothing to compare it with. There is nothing usual or normal about the world, she says. It is extraordinary, and poets especially cannot cease to be amazed by it. The fact that they do not know adds to this amazement and sense of incredulousness. In "Astonishment," Szymborska looks closely at the sense of astonishment she feels as a person and a poet who "does not know" as she surveys the seemingly ordinary world and its unfathomable mysteries.

Lines 1-4

poem takes the form of a series of ten questions. That there are exactly ten questions gives the work a sense of formality and order, which is undercut by the fact that the questions are essentially unanswerable. From the beginning, as the questions are posed, the poet refers to herself, but she only makes this explicit a few times in the course of the poem. In the first four lines, she asks a series of "why" questions. She begins by asking why it is that she is the particular being she is and not one or all of the others that she could be or could have been in the universe. Why, she asks in line 2, is she this specific self? She goes on to wonder why she is a human being who lives in a house as opposed to, say, a bird in a nest. And why is this self she occupies "sewn up" in the skin of a human being rather than the scales of a fish? Why is her self in a body topped off with a face and not a tree topped off by a leaf instead?

As the poet asks these questions, however, she does not refer specifically to herself, humans, birds, fish, or trees. Rather, she refers to the external dwellings of the creatures she describes. She asks why her self is in a house rather than a nest, only

suggesting and not stating explicitly that she is referring to birds and humans. She does not refer to fish but to "scales," and talks about a "leaf" but not a tree. By referring only to the external trappings of humans and animals, the poet suggests that the "self" in each of them is in fact not so different. Each of these creatures is a living being, an existent entity that finds itself in a particular situation, trapped as it were in a particular body. But there seems to be no reason□at least that the poet can decipher□why each of them is confined to or assigned the external body it has received. The poet does not understand why it has come about that, of all the possible places it could have been, her self happens to be housed in the particular human body she has, or why she is this particular self at all.

Lines 5-9

In the next five lines, the poet asks another series of "why" questions. She moves now from queries about the specific self she is to questions about time and place. Why, she asks, is she here at this very moment? She even specifies the day she is asking these questions□Tuesday□and wonders why she is here on this of all days. And not only that, why is she even on *Earth* at all? Why is she "pinned down" by this star's pin? That is, why is she bound to this particular planet of all those out there? The references to the present and a specific day suddenly personalizes the questions and makes it clear that it is a particular person posing them. The poet also for the first time refers to herself explicitly, as she asks why she is on Earth now "In spite of years of my not being here?" She suggests that it seems to be some sort of accident that she is here. For years she was not, so why is she now? The universe has gone on for a long time without her. It is a vast "sea" of time and different fates of different living things, from cells to heavenly bodies to sea creatures. All these things, with their different forms of existence, were here before, but she was not. And so, she wonders, why is she now? Why is she here despite the fact that the universe has gone on in all its complexity for such a long time without her?

Lines 10-13

The poet then moves from asking questions about "why" to questions about "what." Here she seems to be looking for an explanation of some source (perhaps God or other maker, or some more general creative principle) that made things as they are. As in the rest of the poem, even as she asks questions, the poet also reveals to the reader something about what she herself thinks. She asks what it is that made her appear "neither an inch nor half a globe too far, / neither a minute nor aeons too early?" Here she suggests that the fact that she exists is the result of conditions being exactly perfect for that to happen. The fact that she is herself is due to her coming into existence precisely where she did and when she did. The question, then, is what made this so? That is, what made it happen that she became *her* in exactly the way she did? Even as the poet asks "what" made her "fill" herself "so squarely," she does not point particularly to God or some other specific entity, but leaves the possibilities completely open. It is, she implies, a complete mystery to her.

Lines 14-16

In the last lines of the poem, the poet reinforces the fact that her various questions have yielded no answers. She simply does not know. She does not even know why she is "staring now into the dark" and saying the words she is. The image of staring into the dark emphasizes the poet's ignorance as she throws out her various questions with apparently no hope of a response. The image of someone sitting in the dark "now" asking questions also again reminds readers that the questions are being posed by a real person with real concerns. The questions the poet asks are not from the past, are not "philosophical" in some abstract sense, but are very real, concrete, and immediate, tackling as they do real puzzles about daily existence as humans experience them. But the poet says she does not know why she stares into the dark and mutters this "unending monologue." It is unending, of course, because there is an infinite number of questions about the world and her place in it that she could ask. It is a monologue because she does not expect any response from anyone, or to get any answers at all to her questions. While she has suggested that the questions are important and constant and pressing, the poet at the end indicates that they perhaps mean very little. She compares herself muttering to the "growling thing we call a dog." Again, it could be that what she is saying is that her questions ultimately are as meaningless as the growling sounds of a dog. It could also mean that the dog too has similar types of concerns that she does as he goes about his daily existence. The poet has compared herself to animals in the beginning of the poem, so it is likely she does not think of other animals as being somehow less involved in or part of the complexity of the world. She seems to imply in the last line that she thinks the articulation of the kinds of questions she has posed are really no more meaningful than the sounds made by a dog. The question remains as to whether she thinks the growling of the dog is also an attempt to understand some of the mysteries of the world. The growling might indicate fear of the unknown or a sense of unease, and maybe she is not so different from the "rest" she refers to in line 1 as she expresses her wonderment about the nature of the world.

Themes

The Inscrutable Mysteries of the World

Szymborska touches on a number of themes in her sixteen-line poem, but they all center around the idea of the unfathomable nature of the world in which humans□and indeed all beings□find themselves. The title of the poem itself, indicating that a possible reaction to the world when one takes a moment to think about it is "astonishment," underscores that it is a place of amazement and wonder. The fact that the poet asks questions that are not answered (or can even *be* answered, perhaps), emphasizes too that the world's mysteries simply cannot be penetrated. The poet asks why she is the creature she is, why she is here now and in this place, why she suddenly came into existence when the universe had gone on for such a long time without her, what made the conditions exactly so that she would come into being, and what made her the very person she is. After she asks all these questions, she recognizes that there are no answers forthcoming, that she is posing these questions into the darkness. She is not in dialogue with the universe, but simply muttering a monologue to herself.

While the poet asks unanswerable questions and there is a sense that the mysteries of existence will always be mysteries, the way the questions are posed make them seem immediate and important to everyday human experience. Although the questions are philosophical, they are framed in such a way that they are not abstract but related to ordinary human life. By using concrete images at the beginning of the poem□of a house, nest, scales, skin, a leaf, a face□the poet points out that it is the most basic, material aspects of life that are a source of astonishment. By referring to the very real present ("Tuesday"), the reader is drawn to the here and now and made to recognize that these questions are relevant for all people, including oneself in this particular moment. Toward the end of the poem, the poet also looks at the world from a more distant point of view, surveying the "star" that is the Earth and considering the grand sweep of time in which the world has existed. She wonders in lines 10-13 what made her appear in this world "neither an inch nor half a globe too far, / neither a minute nor aeons too early?" Here she compares vast spaces and times with tiny ones and in doing so implies that they are both equally mysterious. Thus, the grand complexity of the world and the way it appears to humans in "normal" life are similarly inscrutable.

The Contingency of Human Existence

"Astonishment" opens with the poet asking why she has taken on this particular self and not some other. Throughout the poem, she wants to know why she has taken on this specific existence out of the huge number of possibilities of what she could have been. She talks about the various beings that populate the world, from birds to trees, from cells to heavenly bodies and sea creatures. Of course, she receives no answer to this question. But the fact that she continues to marvel at the fact of her existence suggests perhaps that what she□a human in a particular body existing at a particular time□is

merely some accident or chance event. It did not *have* to happen that she was filled with herself so squarely. It just so happens that this is the turn of events that have taken place. She could just as easily have been a bird or fish or tree, but as it turned out she is a woman, a poet, saying particular words on a particular Tuesday. Human existence, indeed all existence, then, is something that merely happens without a plan or reason. Perhaps it is contingent or accidental that things have turned out as they have. However, since the poet never actually receives a response to her many questions, it is not clear that human existence *is* in fact contingent in this way. It could be that there is a reason the poet is who she is. There could be a "what," as she suggests, that made her appear in exactly the time and place that she does. With her questions, then, the poet suggests both that maybe all existence is arbitrary, following no set plan, and also that there might be an explanation for things being as they are□it is just that she does not know what the explanations are since her questions are not being answered.

The Status of the Human Animal

Throughout the poem, the poet compares herself to other living creatures. She wonders why she is not a bird, a fish, or a tree but a human being. At the end of the poem, she likens herself asking questions to a dog growling. By doing this, she creates a sense that humans are not so different from the other beings that make up the world. Humans are different from other creatures in some ways, but perhaps they arrogantly assume that they are more different than they actually are. Humans are said to stand apart from other living creatures because of their ability to reason. Even this the poet undercuts at the end of the poem by implying that the questioning or philosophizing she has been engaged in (using her rational faculties) is not so different from what a dog is doing as he growls. Both are responses to one's external environment and an attempt to make sense of it. There is a strong suggestion in the poem that human beings are not so different or special in the scheme of things, that they are simply one aspect of and part of this strange and fascinating world.

Skepticism and Ignorance

By posing a series of questions that are not answered, the poet stresses that she simply does not know. She asks the most basic questions about human life: why she is here, why she is what she is, what made her appear here at this very moment. But she then makes no attempt to provide answers. The poet portrays herself as ignorant, as she stares "into the dark" muttering these questions to herself. But she is not merely ignorant of the answers. There is a very real sense that there are no answers available at all. The poet is thus not simply ignorant, but she is skeptical that the kinds of questions she poses can be satisfactorily answered. Even the way she asks the questions, she finds to be problematic. She has bared herself and asked profound questions about the nature of herself and the world, but she feels at the end of the poem that the questions are simply mutterings. It could be that the nature of the world and existence is such that even the way humans (or other beings) ask questions about it do not come anywhere close to unraveling its mysteries.

Style

Form

Because "Astonishment" was originally written in Polish, it is difficult to comment on the subtleties of the poem's style since some of the techniques in the translation may in fact not apply to the original work. However, the most obvious device the poet uses□that of posing a series of questions□ is as effective in English as it must be in the Polish original. The entire poem is simply a series of questions that are loosely organized around certain broad themes. The poem begins by asking questions about the specific "self" that occupies the poet's body. It then moves to asking questions about time and place, moving away from the poet's particular self to her place in the cosmos as she shares it with all manner of other creatures. The poet then turns to asking questions about what could have made things as they are and what has made her the very specific person that she is. Finally, she overturns all her previous questions by asking why she is asking these seemingly meaningless questions at all. As she moves deliberately through the various questions, the poet builds a sense of wonder and "astonishment" at the world. She makes the normal, everyday world seem quite extraordinary. But then at the end of the poem, these questions are undercut and even mocked by the poet herself, who compares them to the growlings of a dog. After posing a series of profound, metaphysical questions that seem somehow so relevant to human reality, the poet questions the very act of questioning itself.

The sixteen lines of the poem have a definite rhyme scheme of *aabccbdeedfeefgg*. The work is thus bounded by two rhyming couplets, giving it a sense of order and symmetry. An impression of order comes too from the fact that the poet moves slowly and deliberately through her questions, starting with queries about her self to those about the Earth and then tackling issues of physical being, time, and space, one by one. The cerebral, reasonable tone also confers a feeling of calm in the poem; the poet never rails against the universe but simply asks pointedly and in an extremely rational manner certain fundamental questions about existence. However, the apparent order and calm suggested by the structure of the poem is contrasted with the sense of uncertainty generated by the content of the poem, in which answers to the poet's questions are not offered and nothing is known. The poem's external form seems to suggest that while things may appear to be one way from the outside, when considered more closely they are far more mysterious and complicated.

Language

Szymborska's poetry is known for its simplicity and spareness of language. The Nobel Committee, when they conferred the Nobel Prize for literature on the poet in 1996, commented on her "finely chiseled diction." "Astonishment" is a fine example of the poet's art, as she manages to ask deep metaphysical questions using the most ordinary language and images. Nowhere in the poem does the reader encounter difficult

philosophical concepts or arcane (known to only a few) references. The images provided are of the things of ordinary existence, including birds, fish, trees, and cells. The sentences used are terse, with questions being asked almost in a sort of shorthand to be as direct as possible. It is extraordinary that in sixteen simple lines Szymborska manages to probe so deeply the mysteries of the world. She does this by using straightforward, accessible language to tap into readers' direct experiences as human beings and thus to draw attention to their strange and wondrous nature.

Historical Context

Szymborska wrote "Astonishment" in 1972, a period of considerable political tension in Poland. However, the poem is decidedly apolitical, like much of Szymborska's verse. Over her career, despite having lived in a country in which politics has in many ways defined how people think and live, the poet has for the most part written poetry that does not make any overt political statements. This has brought her criticism from some quarters. But, as she has expressed both in her 1996 Nobel lecture and a 1996 interview with Dean Murphy in the *Los Angeles Times*, for her to offer political opinions would be to somehow indicate that she has answers to certain questions, which she feels she does not. She says that the mistake that the Communist Party made, for example, was to think that it had the final answer to the question about an ideal form of society when it clearly did not. She admits too that in her early years, she considered that communism's "answer" was the right one. Now she looks at the political verse she wrote in her early years as a mistake, and says that she simply does not have the nature of a political activist. However, says Szymborska, it would be wrong to assume that because she does not write political poetry that she is not politically engaged; as she says in her poem "Children of the Age," "apolitical poems are political too." That is, one can write verse that is relevant to very real human concerns without offering solutions in the form of political doctrines. The poet writes verse in her own style, not making overt claims about politics and ideologies, making her readers think by probing with great intensity those ideas that are fundamental to human life and existence.

From the beginning of her career, politics played a large role in Szymborska's life, as it did in the life of every other Polish citizen. Shortly after the end of World War II, when Szymborska was a teenager, Poland had emerged as a Communist state, a "people's democracy" on the Soviet model. In 1952, a new constitution was adopted, again modeled after that of the USSR. Under Communist rule, there were considerable restrictions on individual liberties, including restrictions on freedom of expression. For example, when Szymborska tried to publish her first collection of verse in 1951, the Communist government deemed it unfit to be published because it did not adequately reflect the principles of the Communist state. Like much of Szymborska's later work, the poems in the collection were concerned with questions of basic human existence. When she could not publish the collection, Szymborska revised her work to make it more political and in line with the Communist philosophy. *Dlatego zyjemy* (*That's What We Live For*), which reflected the government's socialist-realist ideology, was published in 1952. In 1954, Szymborska published another collection, *Pytania Zadawane Sobie* (*Questions Put to Myself*), with the same political bent.

After the death of the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1953, there was a move toward greater liberalization. Polish artists, intellectuals, students, and workers raised demands for government reforms and a greater measure of freedom from Soviet control. In June 1956, workers staged demonstrations in Poznan; the quelling of the uprising left fifty-three people dead and several hundred wounded. One of the results of the demonstration was greater political freedom, as the government loosened its control of its citizens. Censorship restrictions were lifted to some degree, and writers were freer to

express their own opinions. In 1957, Szymborska published her third volume of poetry, *Wolaanie do Yeti* (*Calling Out to Yeti*), which was a clear departure from the verse she had published earlier that praised the ideology of communism. She disavowed the ideas in those earlier works, and in her work as an editor and writer for magazines, she aligned herself with more liberal thinkers and positions. The 1957 collection also signaled Szymborska's clear move away from writing political poetry. Her work in the 1960s continued in this vein.

In the late 1960s, economic conditions in Poland became increasingly bad. Social dissatisfaction increased, with demonstrations against the government and popular calls for greater freedom and less censorship. In 1968, there were a number of anti-government demonstrations at universities, as students demanded greater cultural and individual freedoms. The government responded by repressing liberties even further. Dissatisfaction continued to grow, and in December 1970, there were a number of workers' strikes. A week long state of emergency was declared, and the demonstrations were put down with the help of military force. There was considerable loss of life involved. Conditions began to improve in the early 1970s with another attempt at liberalization, but the ruling Communist regime continued to have great control over its citizenry, a situation that would continue until 1989 when Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first democratically elected leader of Poland, took office. During these decades of upheaval, Szymborska continued to write apolitical poetry. The 1972 collection in which "Astonishment" appeared, for example, is highly philosophical in nature and makes scant reference to the social and political situation of contemporary Poland. Even if her poetry was not politically charged, Szymborska was active in the Polish literary underground and engaged in the struggle against censorship. She continued to write poetry that was true to her nature, and perhaps the greatest political statement of her career is that she has steadfastly resisted presenting any ideology in her writing, preferring to use her powers of observation to look at the world and understand it from a variety of perspectives.

Critical Overview

When Szymborska was informed on October 3, 1996, that she had won the Nobel Prize for literature, she said that the world "came crashing down on me." Until then, the shy and retiring Szymborska was a well regarded poet who had a loyal following in Poland but who was virtually unknown outside her own country. Almost everyone□in Poland and abroad□was surprised that one of the world's highest literary honors was going to a woman whose poetic output was so small (she had published only around two hundred poems over her career) and who did not have an impressive international reputation. Those who knew her work, however, recognized that Szymborska was worthy of the award. Although she is not a prolific writer, she has been regarded since the late 1970s as a leading voice in contemporary Polish poetry. Beginning with her third collection, *Wolaanie do Yeti* (*Calling Out to Yeti*) in 1957, her reputation grew steadily and she gained an ever-widening audience in Poland. Because of the decidedly apolitical tenor of her work (at least after some initial attempts at writing political poetry in the early 1950s), she drew little attention from Western critics, whose interest in eastern European poetry had a largely political motivation. Most Western critics were interested in a certain type of literature that was being written "behind the iron curtain," and Szymborska's work did not fit the stereotype. A few English translations of her work appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, but it was not until she won the Nobel Prize that her work elicited any real interest from the English-speaking world.

Even then, little has been written about Szymborska's poetry. The critic Bogdana Carpenter maintains that the dearth of studies about her work is, paradoxically, due to "Szymborska's very simplicity and directness," which "present the greatest challenge to the critic." The analytic language of literary criticism, claims Carpenter, seems powerless and inadequate when dealing with Szymborska's deceptively transparent verse; it seems heavy-handed and clumsy in contrast to the poet's light and agile lines. Thus, there are only a handful of articles written in English about Szymborska's poetry, and those tend to be general, dealing with the major themes that reappear in her work and pointing out the clarity and purity of her language. There have been no studies devoted exclusively to any poem, including "Astonishment." In the few essays devoted to her work, that poem is only mentioned in passing. Edyta Bojanowska cites the poem as an example of how far Szymborska's nature "remains . . . an inscrutable mystery, in the face of which amazement and wonder are the only appropriate reactions." And Jonathan Aaron uses it to show how Szymborska has a tendency to shift the scale in which the events she observes are happening, moving from perspective to perspective. That critics have not devoted much time to detailed analyses to this or other poems by Szymborska is, however, not an indictment of her work or a commentary on its lack of relevance. As Szymborska has made clear in the few interviews she has given, including a *Los Angeles Times* interview in 1996, she does not like to offer details of her personal life or beliefs, and she does not like to talk about and analyze poetry. She prefers her readers to have a one-to-one relationship with her poems, and she thinks that poetry should speak for itself. That Szymborska has won the highest literary honor in the world without the help of critics to champion or "explain" it, that it is accessible

and moving to readers without critical analysis, is perhaps an indication that her poetry does indeed speak for itself.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kukathas is a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Kukathas suggests that Szymborska's poem has a deeper political message than is immediately apparent.

One of the reasons the world was so surprised by the announcement in 1996 that Szymborska had won the Nobel Prize for literature was that her work is so apolitical. Not that all prize winners in the past have focused on political issues in their writing, but certainly in the latter part of the twentieth century, eastern European writers with international reputations have shown a particularly political bent in their work. The Polish writer before Szymborska to win the prize, and the person most responsible for the visibility of modern Polish poetry, for example, is the poet Czeslaw Milosz, who made his name in the West in the 1950s with his critique of totalitarianism, *The Captive Mind*. In that work, Milosz observes that:

> In Central and Eastern Europe the word 'poet' has a somewhat different meaning from what it has in the West. There a poet does not merely arrange words in beautiful order. Tradition demands that he be a 'bard,' that his songs linger on many lips, that he speak in his poems of subjects of interest to all the citizens.

But Szymborska's work, unlike that of her well known compatriots, Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Tadeusz Rózecicz, and Miron Bialowszewski, has defied this model. Or at least, this is the opinion of most readers of Szymborska's work. Bogdana Carpenter, for example, states that Szymborska is "not a political poet"; Felicity Rosslyn remarks that Szymborska "has not shouldered [the] political and historical burdens [of Milosz], and she has played no national role"; and Clare Cavanagh notes that the poet "makes no over pronouncements on the great themes that have preoccupied other Eastern European writers." Szymborska, too, has insisted that she does not have the nature of an activist, and that her writing is not political. However, even if Szymborska's work makes no overt political statements, it seems a mistake to think of it as completely apolitical. Certainly, Szymborska does not show in her poetry (save in her early social-realist verse) allegiances to any one ideology. But this is not to say that absent from her work are "subjects of interest to all the citizens." In fact, if one looks at the ideas set forth in "Astonishment"□an apparently apolitical poem□in the context of the poet's life and career, it would indicate that the poet does present ideas that are, in an unusual but profound way, deeply political.

At first glance, "Astonishment" appears to be a poem solely about the nature of existence in a metaphysical, not a political, sense. In it, the poet asks a series of questions about the very nature of being and humans' place in the scheme of things. She is concerned with fundamental issues about her particular "self," why she occupies the body she does, why she exists in the world at this very moment, and why the universe saw fit, after so many aeons, that she should suddenly come to be.

Significantly, she does not ask any questions about human morality or governance, or anything else one would normally associate with politics. However, it is equally significant that in the poem, the poet receives no answers to the questions she poses. The entire poem is made up of ten questions, but nowhere does the poet pause to consider how she might answer the questions she has raised. The questions follow quickly one upon another, probing more and more deeply into the mysteries of the universe. But why, it should be asked, does the poet not even consider how her questions might be responded to? One possibility, suggested by the poem, seems to be that there are no appropriate responses, at least in rational terms, to these questions. The only fitting response is not intellectual at all, but emotional; it is the reaction of "astonishment." To try to articulate answers to the questions about the world in all its mystery would simply not get us very far. They would be vain attempts to get to the bottom of something that simply is not within our capacity to answer.

Another possible answer is suggested by Szymborska in the poem and also reinforced in her other writings and in her career as a poet. Again, essentially the answer is that the questions are not responded to because in some important way there are no appropriate responses to them. In fact, providing definitive answers to the questions posed would take us further from, rather than closer to, the truth. This is because coming up with answers that are deemed to be the "correct" ones might make us complacent and not investigate even further to really understand what the nature of reality is. As Szymborska explains in her 1996 Nobel lecture, poets must live and work with a constant sense that they "don't know." She says that this feeling of "not knowing" is essential if one is to retain an insatiable curiosity about the world. And it is only this curiosity about the world that allows people to learn more about it. For if we think we "know," we cease to be inspired to ask more questions and investigate further. In her lecture, Szymborska also explains that there are certain people in the world who claim that they "know," and this is an extremely dangerous position to take. She says, "All sorts of torturers, dictators, fanatics, and demagogues struggling for power with a few loudly shouted slogans . . . know," and

> whatever they know is enough for them once and for all. They don't want to find out about anything else since that might diminish the force of their arguments. But any knowledge that doesn't lead to new questions quickly dies out; it fails to maintain the temperature required for sustaining life. In the most extreme cases, cases well known from ancient and modern history, it even poses a lethal threat to society.

Thus, it seems that one of Szymborska's reasons for insisting that there are no answers to life's deepest questions is because of the trap humans fall into when they think they have come upon the "truth" about something. The Communist Party in Poland and the Soviet Union, for example, thought they had the final solution to the question of how society should function. Very often, dissent from that established position was met with violence and repression. Szymborska was no stranger to the pressures of the Communist government as it insisted that only certain ideas□the official "truth"□ should

be communicated. Her first collection of poetry was not published because it was deemed by the government to not be political enough nor to sufficiently echo the ideology of the Communist state. Szymborska revised her work and published two collections that reflected the supposedly correct ideological views of her government. She later retracted the views in those volumes and has since taken a more liberal position on political issues in her country. She has been a critic of the Communist state, and under martial law in the early 1980s, published poems under a pseudonym in Polish underground and exile publications. Szymborska insists that she has not replaced what she "knew" then with another form of ideology. Rather, as she says in her Nobel lecture, she thinks it is crucial that to avoid the damaging effects of uncritical ideology, one needs to take a stance in which one continues to question, probe, think, and ponder, and not to assume that one "knows."

"Astonishment" is essentially a philosophical poem and not a political one, but this is not to say that there is no political message that can be learned from it. When one looks at Szymborska's comments about politics and the damaging effects of assuming to "know" the truth, it seems that what the poet might be doing in the poem is showing that it is the asking of questions rather than the answering of them that is most important. Indeed, by not offering any answers at all, she seems to be suggesting that perhaps there are some questions in this world that simply cannot be answered definitively at all. For when one tries to provide final answers to such questions, one runs the risk of assuming that one "knows" the truth when one does not. Dictators and demagogues, as she says, routinely assume they "know" the truth and refuse to listen to different answers to the questions, which can be a lethal threat to society. When one looks at the world, the appropriate response is not to think that one can figure out its deepest mysteries and come up with a single way to understand what reality is or how humans should live. A more appropriate response to it should perhaps be one of astonishment. Thus the poem has a subtle political message because it warns against the dangers of assuming one "knows" too much, which the poet has learned first hand is dangerous for individuals and society.

Szymborska was not the first person who, by asking philosophical questions, made a radical political statement. The philosopher Socrates, who lived in Greece in the fifth century B.C.E., was known too for upsetting the status quo in his home of Athens by asking questions of people, many of them prominent Athenian citizens, who claimed to "know" the truth in matters of religion, politics, morality, and metaphysics. Socrates, like Szymborska, claimed that he was ignorant, that he did not know, but he felt that the people who proposed to know were no more wise than he, and in fact, their positions were often dangerous because they insisted that what was false was actually true. Socrates was eventually executed because in asking questions he made people recognize that the "received," or official, truth of his government was not necessarily correct. His radicalism was not in presenting a competing ideology with the status quo but simply in asking questions, in showing that what was accepted as the truth might not be. Szymborska in "Astonishment" may be seen to be doing the same thing. In the poem, she does not make grand statements about the political situation of her country or offer political ideas. She does show that there are some things about which it is more important to ask questions than to present answers. And if, in asking those questions,

one casts doubt on ideas that to everyone else seemed so certain, this is a good thing. For only by continuing to ask questions can humans make the best of themselves and avoid the dangers of single-minded political ideologies.

Source: Uma Kukathas, Critical Essay on "Astonishment," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Perkins teaches American and British literature and film. In this essay, Perkins examines the questions the poem raises on the complex nature of existence.

In Robert Frost's poem "Design," the speaker describes a scene that occurs regularly in nature. A moth is attracted to a flower, and after landing on it, is quickly consumed by a spider that has been lying there in wait for its next meal. The speaker offers a contradictory response to this event, considering it to be a natural part of the cycle of life as it "begins the morning right," yet at the same time, finding something sinister in these "assorted characters of death and blight."

In the second stanza, the speaker questions how and why this incident occurred. He asks what brought the spider and the moth together at the same specific moment, and what this death scene suggests about the laws of the universe. At first, he asks whether a "design of darkness" steered the two to the flower, suggesting that a malevolent force shapes our experience. Then, however, he forces us to recognize that there may be no guiding force in nature, that design may not "govern in a thing so small."

Frost raises these compelling questions on the nature of the design of the universe, questions that are at the heart of much of twentieth-century literature, but refuses to provide conclusive answers. In "Astonishment," Wislawa Szymborska continues this existential line of questioning as the speaker in the poem considers the establishment of identity. As she presents a series of questions centering on why we are who we are, Szymborska expresses an epistemological uncertainty about our sense of self. Ultimately, she suggests, we can never know or understand with any certainty the nature of our existence.

In her acceptance speech for the 1996 Nobel award for literature, Szymborska insists that all poets constantly struggle with the statement, "I don't know." She explains that all poems delineate an "effort to answer this statement, but as soon as the final period hits the page, the poet begins to hesitate, starts to realize that this particular answer was pure makeshift, absolutely inadequate." This type of indeterminacy is at the heart of her poem "Astonishment."

The poem consists of a series of ten questions, asked by the speaker, about the nature of existence. The poem begins its philosophical reflection in the first line, which asks what determines whether one will be a human or a bird or a fish or a tree? Szymborska suggests that a certain sense of confinement results in the acknowledgment that we have been constructed as a specific self without being allowed any input into or knowledge of the process. She asks why we have been "sewn up" in skin rather than scales, and live in a house rather than a nest, and "topped off" with a face rather than a leaf.

The next series of questions relate to the specific time and place of one's existence. The speaker asks why each of us exists during a specific moment and why we exist on earth

instead of on another planet or in another universe. Szymborska reinforces the lack of free will expressed in the early lines of the poem when she notes that we live on Earth, "pinned down by the star's pin." In line 7, the speaker tries to determine the self's relationship to time, noting the "dates" and "years of my not being here." In the next question, Szymborska speaks for all of us, focusing of the development of humanity and its differentiation from simpler forms of life, like the coelenterates. How, she asks, did our cells come together under our celestial bodies to form us into a higher order of species?

In line ten, the speaker turns the line of questioning to a specific one centering on the act of creation. He or she "really" wants to know who or what situates us in a specific moment of time and place, "neither an inch nor half a globe too far, neither a minute nor aeons too early." Line thirteen tries to get at the essence of the self when the speaker asks, "what made me fill myself with me so squarely?"

The last three lines of the poem take a more somber turn. Szymborska's suggestions of a lack of control in the process of creation become a statement on the imprisonment of the self within a wall of uncertainty. By the end of the poem, the speaker admits to "staring now into the dark and muttering this unending monologue" to which no one will respond. The inability to find answers to these compelling questions on the nature of existence fills the speaker with frustration and anger, and the monologue becomes "just like the growling thing we call a dog."

In her Nobel speech, Szymborska expresses the thesis of the poem as she insists that "whatever we might think when terrified by its vastness and our own impotence, or embittered by its indifference to individual suffering, of people, animals" or "whatever we might think of its expanses pierced by the rays of stars surrounded by planets" the world is "astonishing." Though we have "reserved tickets" to this incomprehensible "measureless theater" that has a "laughably short" lifespan, "bounded as it is by two arbitrary dates," it continually amazes us.

That astonishment, however, conceals what Szymborska calls "a logical trap." She notes that ordinarily we experience this reaction when presented with "things that deviate from some well-known and universally acknowledged norm, from an obviousness we've grown accustomed to." But her poem reveals an incomprehensible world that cannot by compared to something that we can understand. Her questions are unsettling, focusing on the precarious nature of existence. Thus, frustration and anger result, and we growl like dogs.

The astonishment in the poem becomes a complex mixture of delight and frustration. Ruth Franklin, in her article on Szymborska for the *New Republic*, notes that in her "meditations on the human condition," the poet has "a special flair for the opening line." In them, Szymborska presents "straightforward propositions that veer off in an unsettling yet gently humorous direction." The first line in "Astonishment" announces that the author will travel on a characteristic route. It begins with the central question of the poem, what defines the self, and then travels in several directions in an attempt to come up with an answer. Throughout the poem, she maintains a playful tone, full of wit and

intellectual rigor. She shows true pleasure in observing and identifying nature's phenomena, the dates and fates, and the cells, celestials, and coelenterates, including human beings. We are, she suggests, special in our individuality; yet when we cannot find the answers to essential questions that help us define that individuality, we gain a sense of being confined to a state of ignorance.

In an article for *World Literature Today*, Bogdana Carpenter comments that as she crafts her philosophical probings, Szymborska rarely offers definitive statements. "Reluctant to provide definitive answers, the poet prefers a margin of uncertainty." Carpenter suggests that Szymborska's reluctance does not result from "a lack of moral determination," but is instead "an expression of openness . . . an awareness that truth is complex and ambiguous, that reality is thick and consists of a myriad details, all of which need to be taken into account." This uncertainty is at the heart of "Astonishment," as it participates in the twentieth century dialogue on the complex nature of being. Like Frost's "Design," "Astonishment" leaves the readers with the opportunity to articulate their own individual responses to the compelling questions it raises.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "Astonishment," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

The Nobel Prize Committee maintains a Szymborska web page at http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1996/index.html (last accessed January, 2002) with links to other interesting sites.

Topics for Further Study

To what extent do you think the questions the poet poses in "Astonishment" are unanswerable? Do you think that all such "metaphysical" questions cannot be answered? What might some answers be to these questions?

What are some of the questions you have about the nature of the world and human existence? How are they different from or similar to Szymborska's questions?

Do you think that human beings are ultimately not so very different from other animals? Why or why not?

Research some of the answers that philosophers, political thinkers, or religious figures throughout the ages have considered in response to Szymborska's questions about the nature of existence.

Is Szymborska right in saying that poets must take an attitude that they "don't know"? What do you see as potential problems with taking such a position?

Compare and Contrast

Early 1970s: There is heavy censorship in Poland, but there is a lively literary underground that publishes banned books.

Today: United States citizens enjoy a greater degree of freedom of expression than perhaps any other people, but there is a movement to remove certain books from school shelves because of supposedly inappropriate content.

Early 1970s: Social dissatisfaction is rampant, and there are workers' strikes all over Poland that lead to riots, arson, and looting.

Today: There are demonstrations and riots in several cities in the United States because of alleged racial profiling and discrimination against various minorities.

Early 1970s: The Communist Party is still in power, but there is a strong movement in Poland against Communist rule.

Today: The United States has an active Communist Party that participates in every general election but wins a negligible number of votes.

What Do I Read Next?

Poems New and Collected: 1957-1997 (1998) by Wislawa Szymborska is the definitive collection of Szymborska's poetry in English. It includes translations of 164 of her poems as well as her Nobel lecture of 1996.

The Book of Questions by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda and translated by William O'Daly (1991) is a collection of 316 brief poems in the form of unanswerable questions, integrating the wonder of a child with the experiences of an adult.

New and Collected Poems: 1931-2001 (2001) celebrates the exceptional career of the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1980. Although Milosz's poetry is far more political than that of Szymborska, it is also known for its penetrating insight into fundamental human questions.

The Big Questions: A Short Introduction to Philosophy (1997), by Robert Soloman, is an introductory text to philosophy that is comprehensive without being intimidating.

Further Study

Cavanagh, Clare, "Poetry and Ideology: The Example of Wislawa Szymborska," in *Literary Imagination*, Vol.17, No. 2, 1999, pp. 174-90.

Cavanagh discusses how Szymborska, in poetry, explores the world from many points of view and resists ideological pronouncements.

Lukowski, Jerzy, and Herbert Zawadzki, *A Concise History of Poland*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Lukowski and Zawadzki present a short history that describes how Polish society developed under foreign rule in the nineteenth century and how it was altered by and responded to forty-five years of communism.

Milosz, Czeslaw, *The History of Polish Literature*, University of California Press, 1984.

Milosz's book is the standard text of Polish literary history in English, covering the highlights of Polish writing from its beginnings to the 1980s.

Rosslyn, Felicity, "Miraculously Normal: Wislawa Szymborska," in *PN Review*, May/June 1994, pp. 14-18.

This article considers what issues of importance Szymborska might be exploring in her elegant, simple verse and finds that the poet can create beautiful poetry out of the most mundane subjects.

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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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