Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio Study Guide

Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio by James Wright

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Introduction

Like many of James Wright's poems, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" is an autobiographical account of an occurrence in Wright's hometown in southeastern Ohio. It was published in the 1963 collection *The Branch Will Not Break,* a book which came to mark a turning point in the poet's writing style, moving him from formal, rhyming patterns to a more lyrical free verse. This poem highlights a subject consistent in Wright's work, namely the distressing and pitiable lives of many working class Americans who struggled through the Great Depression of the 1930s and whose descendants still struggle today.

The setting for "Autumn Begins" is a typical Friday night high school football game with most of the players' fathers watching from the stands. The narrator of the poem, presumably Wright himself, concentrates more on the men than on the game, depicting them as miserable factory workers who drink too much and can only dream of the heroes they will never be. Their wives are described as "starved pullets / Dying for love," essentially a comment on the husbands themselves who are incapable of or uninterested in intimacy. The brief mention of the boys playing football is also a reflection on the fathers. By watching the violent game, the men imagine that they too are virile and strong, but all the while, they must live their fantasy lives through the lives of their young sons.

This poem is both a portrayal of the way a depleted social environment can also diminish people's spirits and an illustration of the crudeness and violence that Americans have come to think of as acceptable and normal. Throughout his life, James Wright experienced love-hate relationships with his hometown, his state, and his country. The poetry he wrote reflects heavily on those struggles, and "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" captures a moment on the negative side.

Author Biography

James Wright was born in 1927 in Martins Ferry, Ohio, a small industrial town in the southeastern part of the state. Located just across the Ohio River from Wheeling, West Virginia, Martins Ferry shares with its bordering neighbor rows of factories and steel mills where most of the towns' men worked when Wright was growing up. His own father dropped out of school at an early age and spent fifty years at Hazel-Atlas Glass, a factory that would appear in several of Wright's poems. Wright loved his father but detested the life his father lived and vowed not to fall victim to it himself. He used education as a means to escape Martins Ferry, earning his bachelor's degree from Kenyon College in 1952 and his master's and doctorate degrees from the University of Washington in 1954 and 1957. At Kenyon, he studied under John Crowe Ransom, a well-known and highly respected poet regarded as one of the founding fathers of the New Criticism. Ransom's influence on Wright's style was evident in the young poet's early work, which was well crafted and usually formal in style like that of the New Critics. Before leaving Kenyon, Wright received the Robert Frost Poetry Prize. At the University of Washington, Wright studied under Theodore Roethke, also one of America's foremost poets at the time, and Roethke's work as well profoundly influenced Wright's own, sending it in a more casual, "loose" direction. Over the years, Wright's poetry and publications became as popular and highly regarded as those of his teachers, and he, in turn, would have his own students to influence. Wright taught at the University of Minnesota (1957-1963), Macalester College in St. Paul (1963-1964), and Hunter College in New York (1966-1980). Although he enjoyed much success with his poetry and his teaching, Wright also suffered bouts of depression and mania. During the worst times, he drank excessively and was denied tenure at the University of Minnesota because of his frequent drunkenness. His home life was nearly as traumatic. During the early 1960s, he and his first wife separated several times and eventually divorced, forcing Wright to give up custody of his two sons. In 1967, Wright remarried and would enjoy a more stable marriage with his second wife for thirteen years. Although Wright did manage to escape the desolate world of Martins Ferry, Ohio, the poverty and human suffering he witnessed there as a child were always with him in his writing, in his social commentary, and in his personal grief. Wright contracted cancer of the tongue and died in a New York City hospital in 1980.

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Poem Text

In the Shreve High football stadium,

I think of Polacks nursing long beers in

Tiltonsville,

And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at

Benwood,

And the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling

Steel,

Dreaming of heroes.

All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home.

Their women cluck like starved pullets,

Dying for love.

Therefore,

Their sons grow suicidally beautiful

At the beginning of October,

And gallop terribly against each other's bodies.

Plot Summary

Line 1:

It is not unusual for Wright to begin his poems with simple statements indicating place or person so that the reader knows exactly where or who the speaker is. (His poem "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" begins: "My name is James Wright, and I was born / Twenty-five miles from this infected grave / In Martins Ferry, Ohio....") It is also not unusual for the poet to use real-life places and people in his more autobiographical poems, and that is the case here. In 1924, Martins Ferry High School was dedicated as the Charles R. Shreve School, and that was its name when Wright attended high school there in the early 1940s. The key to this opening line, however, is not just his mention of the school itself, but the football stadium in particular. As the rest of the poem will indicate, Wright sees football as a violent game that has become an American ritual□a much beloved one, at that□in spite of the barbarism and destructive nature it represents.

Lines 2-4:

These three lines imply two separate but equally important notions about the narrator's relationship to his surroundings. First, he sets himself up as a detached observer, someone who does not belong to the scene he is watching. What he observes is not the game on the field, but the people in the stands, the fathers who have come to watch their sons play. Secondly, Wright indicates his feelings about the local men and the lives they lead, using language that suggests both abhorrence and sympathy toward them. He thinks "of Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville" (another nearby factory town), but the distasteful euphemism is not so much an ethnic slur as a recognition of the plight of so many immigrants who came to America. Whether their ancestors' immigration was by choice or by force ("And the gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood"), many ethnic groups found themselves struggling to make a living and a home for their families in the United States. The night watchman in line 4, also a factory worker, is "ruptured" in more ways than one. On the literal level, we may assume he has a medical problem, but he is also torn and broken in a spiritual or emotional way. Like these men, Wright's father worked hard for very little in return, and this is the life that the poet desperately avoided.

Line 5:

Wright ends the first stanza with three simple words that sum up the pathetic lives of the men he has described in the previous lines: they can only dream of what they have never been and will never be. The game of football, however, is a vehicle for their dreaming, and Wright will emphasize this point in the final stanza.

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Lines 6-8:

In line 6, the fathers encounter two opposing feelings. They are both "proud" and "ashamed." This quick juxtaposition is indicative of the dual roles that Wright believes most of America's working class has been forced to play. On the outside, the men are nearly beaten down by poverty, frustration, and a hopeless future. On the inside, they take pride in the strength and endurance of their sons who fight so bravely on the field. But for all the comfort they receive from their children, their wives evoke just the opposite. The "women cluck like starved pullets," and this shames their husbands who feel at fault for "starving" them. The poet likens the wives to young hens clucking about the barnyard in search of food, painting a picture of lonely, fretful women who have no real communication, no real relationship with their husbands. But these wives are not starving for food� they are "Dying for love." These three words that make up line 8 are actually more indicative of the men's troubles than of the women's. The line reflects their impotence, perhaps literally, but more likely emotionally. They have no ability to change their lives, to better their environments, or to provide a generous lifestyle for their families. Rather than confront the reality of home life, they stay away as much as possible. They drink for hours in local bars or go to sporting events while their wives grow lonelier and feel more unloved.

Line 9:

This one-word line is the link between the first two stanzas and the closing and serves to turn the poem into a type of syllogism. In this form of deductive reasoning, we have two propositions and a conclusion, such as in: *All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal.* Wright's poem is not as simple and plain as this example, but "Therefore" does indicate a cause and effect relationship between what has been said before and what is to follow. The final three lines expose the "effect" of the rest of the poem.

Lines 10-12:

Wright has already established that the fathers see their sons as heroic and that they derive a dreamlike pleasure from watching them play the game of football. We are not surprised, then, that the boys grow beautiful in line 10, but that they "grow sui-cidally beautiful" is somewhat of a shock. Interpretation of this adverb has generally fallen along two lines with critics over the years. On one hand, the sons are seen as victims of their fathers' dreams, having to play out the violent roles that make them "heroes." On the other hand, they are viewed as desperately willing to fight for their moment of glory even though it will be short-lived, if it comes about at all. In *James Wright: The Poetry of a Grown Man,* Kevin Stein notes that "Though the connection between the despair of the parents and the violent actions of the sons does not follow altogether logically, as the 'therefore' would suggest, still, the speaker's syllogism achieves seamless closure. Having seen the 'ruptured' dream of their fathers and mothers, the sons passionately partake of their own 'suicidally beautiful' ritual of competition, each hoping he, unlike his

father before him, will achieve momentary glory...." Critic David Dougherty views the ritual in a different way. In *James Wright* he states that "The youths train and sacrifice to live out the frustrated dreams of their fathers.... Their athletic skills and developed bodies are sources of beauty, but the controlled violence on the field is suicidal.... Community rituals have degenerated to episodes of institutionalized violence in which the sons are victims of their fathers' aspirations, and the implication is that they will sire sons who will in turn sacrifice for them."

Whether the boys are fighting for their own short-lived glory or simply playing the role of pawns for their fathers' imaginations, the last two lines of the poem tell us that when football season rolls around each year, the sons will "gallop" like stampeding horses and play with fearless abandon. The image of their throwing themselves "terribly" against each other goes hand-in-hand with Wright's overall portrait of desperate people helpless to exert any real control over their own lives.

Themes

American Dream

On a rather obvious level, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" is about the struggles of America's working class. Wright grew up during the Depression and spent his entire youth witnessing the effects of a society that glamorizes wealth and power on the poor and powerless. He uses this poem and many others to portray the way he views the barren lives of blue-collar men and women: they drink too much, they are lonely, they are ashamed, and they find their only comfort in dreaming of a better life. Most of Wright's work expresses the opinion that those dreams do not often come true.

The brief, simple descriptions of the men who sit in the stands at the football game ("Polacks nursing long beers," "Negroes in the blast furnace," "the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling Steel") actually reveal ample, complex problems in their day-to-day existence. These are not problems initiated by personal ineptness or any lack of intelligence or desire on their part. Rather, the poem alludes to the doleful, daily grind of their lives as what they have been handed by American society and the political agendas that keep the status quo intact. Wright often asserted disillusionment with the principals on which he believed his country operated: greed, indulgence, and necessary and accepted inequality. While men like the poet's own father and those in the poem go to work in factories, drink in bars at night, and avoid going home to their lonely wives, there are others who enjoy easy jobs, make lots of money, and live happy lives at home. Wright was not naive enough to believe that wealthy people are always content, but he did see a sharp dividing line between those who made it to the top and those who had to "hold up the world" for them. Ironically, without factories, mills, and mines, the pleasures enjoyed by America's elite would not be possible. But this poem offers no consolation in that fact.

Alienation and Loneliness

The first two words of the second line in "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" denote a subtle theme in the poem that becomes more visible as we read more of James Wright's work. Alienation from one's own environment appears often in his poems, usually taking the form of the narrator as an observer, not a participant, in the poem's action. The words "I think" at the beginning of the line set the narrator apart from his surroundings. He *thinks* of the factory and steel mill workers who sit around him watching their sons play football, but he is not one of them. He does not mention any personal connection to the game, nor is he one of the "proud fathers ... ashamed to go home." Instead, he very poignantly states, *"Their* women cluck ..." and *"Their* sons grow suicidally beautiful...." But although the speaker is personally un-attached to the situation, he is not without empathy for those directly involved.

The dismal scene portrayed in the poem would easily include Wright's own father who spent 50 years working in a glass factory. With fierce and desperate determination, the poet escaped the same fate by getting an education and moving away from Martins Ferry. He intentionally alienated himself from the environment of his childhood and that of his family. This estrangement is different from that felt by people who want to fit in, but, for whatever reason, sense that they do not. Wright's poem speaks to a serf-inflicted separation, sometimes physical and always psychological. The narrator—Wright himself—has "been there," so the understanding, sympathy, and even grief he feels for the working men and their families are real. What is missing from the poem is the belief that the men sitting in the stadium "Dreaming of heroes" can do the same as he did: flee the working class life and start a new one with a rewarding career (both monetarily and intellectually) and a happy relationship with their wives and children. There is no rallying cry in the poem to suggest its characters have any control over their own environment or their fate within it. Rather, these men, women, and children greet each day with resignation and will one day leave their children and grandchildren behind to follow in the same dull footprints. Only the poet has securely alienated himself from this world.

Flesh vs. Spirit

Several of Wright's poems make mention of sports and most often the game is football. "Autumn Begins" is centered around this seasonal event—one that quickly grew in popularity and has become a very real part of American culture. But why football? Why do sports such as bowling, sailing, fencing, volleyball, or even baseball not elicit the same fervor and, often times, violence from people who go to see them? The answer may seem obvious: people prefer excitement and power in their sports more so than tedious strategy and finesse. In a 1979 interview with poet Dave Smith, Wright said of football and the people in his hometown: "The football season, then, was very intensely a communal activity, a communal occasion. Teams from the various towns along the Ohio River ... met and provided a point of focus in which the members of the distinct communities would see one another. Sometimes this meeting, this confrontation with the ritualized, formalized violence of those football teams, would inspire a peculiar kind of violence in the spectators too."

The men whose "sons grow suicidally beautiful" view their boys as heroes—strong, virile, fearless. These are adjectives they cannot apply to themselves and so they are content to sit and watch their sons "gallop terribly against each other's bodies." Other sports surely involve rough physical contact, but the game of football supports (in theory, if not always in practice) a *controlled* violence, "ritualized, formalized," in the poet's words. This makes it especially appealing to those who can only dream of being powerful and in control.

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Style

"Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" is written in free verse, an open style that is non-syllabic and non-rhyming. If we count the poem's line syllables or even the number of lines themselves, there appears to be complete randomness in its construction: five lines in the first verse, three in the second, and four in the third and syllable totals for each line that amount to 9, 13, 15, 11, 5, 11, 8, 4, 2, 11, 9, and 13, respectively. If, though, traditional form does not hold the poem together, the imagery and the placement of particular words most surely provide its cohesion.

Prior to *The Branch Will Not Break,* the book in which "Autumn Begins" first appeared, James Wright wrote mostly in very stylized verse, patterning his work after the likes of Robert Frost and E.A. Robinson, as well as the crafted seventeenth-century poets Ben Johnson and John Donne. With his new book, however, Wright relaxed the form and sought to present his poetry□specifically, its *meaning*□through brief but powerful imagery. His credo became the "pure clear word," extracted from another of his poems ("Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child") in which he says, "The young poets of New York come to me with / Their mangled figures of speech, / But they have little pity / For the pure clear word."

"Autumn Begins" is filled with pure, clear words, making this rather short poem speak loudly and powerfully. The first verse describes the men in the poem, the second verse describes the women, and the third their sons. Each verse makes use of very descriptive adjectives, adverbs, and verbs to bring the images to life: "nursing long beers," "gray faces of Negroes," "ruptured night watchman," "cluck like starved pullets," and "gallop terribly against each other's bodies" all paint a very vivid picture of the scene, even that of the women who are not actually present in the football stadium. As seen earlier, even the otherwise generic word "Therefore" becomes crucial in this poem, and its placement on a line alone connotes the power it holds in forming a bridge between the first two verses and the third. Notice, also, how the last lines of verses one and two mirror each other in both structure and description. The men are "Dreaming of heroes" and the women are "Dying for love." The participles alone□"dreaming" and "dying"□ present an unsettling juxtaposition of images and essentially sum up Wright's version of life in working class America.

Lines 10 and 12 also offer a striking comparison, along with a similar flow of syllabic sound. Pronounced slowly and deliberately, "grow su-i-ci-dal-ly beau-ti-ful" and "gal-lop ter-ri-bly a-gainst" ring hauntingly on the tongue and link the fate of the young football players to that of their dreaming fathers and dying mothers. After closely examining the poem's structure, we may find that the verse is not quite as "free" as first presumed. Truly there is no traditional form at work here, but Wright's careful selection of words and their placement in creating a short poem do reflect deliberate and particular attention to detail.

Historical Context

The 1950s and 1960s were tumultuous times in American history. Although the 1950s are often looked back upon with nostalgia and regarded as a decade of innocence, bobby socks, and souped-up cars, it was also the decade of McCarthyism and the Communist Control Act, atomic testing, air raid shelters, and a government-backed "Red Scare" to maintain public support for a large military budget. According to Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States,* during the period from 1944 to 1961, "The country was on a permanent war economy which had big pockets of poverty, but there were enough people at work, making enough money, to keep things quiet.... The lowest fifth of the families received 5 percent of all the income; the highest fifth received 45 percent of all the income." Also during this period, James Wright graduated from high school in Martins Ferry, earned his bachelor's degree, joined the army and was stationed in Japan during the American occupation, returned home to go to graduate school, and began writing poetry. By the early 1960s, he had won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award and was working on his first free-verse collection which included "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio."

The state of the American economy played a major role in the poet's work, from the Great Depression of the 1930s in which he grew up to the post World War II war economy with its "big pockets of poverty" into which many of Wright's hometown acquaintances fell. Especially troubling to him were not just the debilitating effects of working hard for little money, but the fact that there was such a marked imbalance in the distribution of wealth in America. That the small percentage at the top of society acquired nearly half the income for the entire country was difficult for Wright to swallow. When given the chance, he spoke publicly about his outrage over injustice and inequality, but his most common venue for expressing disgust and cynicism (as well as sympathy and compassion) was his poetry. "Autumn Begins" paints a typical picture of life for the working class during the 1950s. The highlight of the week was a Friday night high school football game, which provided both a diversion from workday drudgery and an opportunity to fantasize about a more romantic, heroic existence.

Although this poem centers mostly on the feelings of the "proud fathers," the second verse is important in depicting the wives of the working class men. They are seen as ineffectual and helpless, simply waiting for their husbands to return home and make them happy. And they are uneducated. Compare the scenario in Wright's poem to a description of American women in the March 7, 1960, issue of *Time:* "The educated American woman has her brains, her good looks, her car, her freedom ... freedom to choose a straight-from-Paris dress (original or copy), or to attend a class in ceramics or calculus; freedom to determine the timing of her next baby or who shall be the next President of the United States." This was the time of Jackie Kennedy who set the standard for dress and hairstyle for many years in America's female population. It was the time of an emerging women's movement and changing attitudes about traditional gender roles. And it was a time of a new spiritual and sexual freedom for women unlike anything imagined in previous decades. But in Wright's Martins Ferry, time had stood still. Most women there had not attended calculus or ceramics classes; they could not

afford dresses from Paris and did not own their own cars; and they most certainly did not feel they had their "freedom." They were, in light of the poet's environment, mere "pullets."

In the 1979 interview with Dave Smith, Wright addressed the issue of what may be called the upper-class "attitude." He stated that, "The person who is born to privilege ... [or has attained it], is often trying to show a common touch he does not really have. One of the most astonishing and, to me, fascinating examples of this is to be found in a photograph that appeared in a newspaper during the 1960 presidential election campaign." Wright goes on to relate the circumstances of the photo in which the wealthy, esteemed Henry Cabot Lodge, Richard Nixon's running mate, was visiting Coney Island. According to Wright, "Lodge knew that he was superb," in his beautiful, expensive white shirt. In order to fit in with the "common" people of Coney Island, though, Lodge had rolled up his sleeves and was not wearing a tie. He also held a hot dog in his hand, and this was the point of fascination for Wright. "The expression on his face revealed profound conflict," Wright said of Lodge. "... He looked at that hot dog as if it were an obscene object which he *had* to eat."

Clearly, a vivid contrast in one's own environment and that of a much more privileged world provides fuel for a creative mind to draw upon. Asked about his feelings on his hometown, Wright seemed both nostalgic and apologetic: "My feelings about it are complicated. People in that place have gotten angry with me for things I've written.... I haven't always written about Martins Ferry but I have tried sometimes to write about the life that I knew."

Critical Overview

As is common with many creative artists who change their style after acquiring a following of fans who like the "old" ways, criticism can be quick and harsh. Wright had his share of bad reviews after publishing his third book, *The Branch Will Not Break,* which marked a very vivid turning point in his poetry. In "The Work of James Wright," an article by fellow poet and friend Robert Bly, the writer describes the views of two particular critics who did not like Wright's new style: "Many reviewers watched this move with hostility," Bly said. "Larry Rubin, Jr., American scholar from Hollins College, ... said of Wright: '... he has gone off on a tangent, it seems to me. He has completely abdicated the job of giving meaning to what he describes....' [Critic] Thom Gunn [stated]: 'In *The Branch Will Not Break,* Wright has pretty well reversed his attitude to style and content.... He is far from being interested in moral questions now, and there is a deliberate avoidance of anything resembling thought.'"

Despite these two similar reproofs, however, Wright's poetry in general—and *Branch* in particular—was, and still is, very highly regarded by writers, scholars, and the poetry-reading public. In Peter Stitt's article, "James Wright: The Quest Motif in *The Branch Will Not Break,"* the critic states that this book of poems "... is generally regarded as marking [Wright's] transformation into an important and path-breaking contemporary poet. It has been described by various critics as 'the real watershed in Wright's work, ''one of the key books of the 1960s,' and as containing poetry 'unlike anything being written in America at the time.'" One of those poems "unlike anything being written" was the highly praised "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," and it is likely the most anthologized poem from the collection.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

David Caplan is a doctoral candidate at the University of Virginia. In the following essay he considers the hopelessness that "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio " expresses.

Grammarians should love James Wright's poem, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio." As many grammar textbooks lament, casual writers rarely take seriously transitional words such as "consequently," "so," and "therefore." As a consequence, these words are often used indiscriminately, tacked on to sentences that seem to be a little short or to lack sufficient rhetorical grandeur. Where these grammatical lapses occur, errors in logic frequently follow; for example, causation is implied where no causation exists.

"Therefore," however, is the most important word in "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio." It is only the word which warrants a complete line; three words comprise the next shortest line. Furthermore, "therefore" is conspicuously placed at the start of the final stanza. There the entire poem turns on this seemingly modest word.

The first two stanzas describe the hardscrabble inhabitants of Wright's hometown. The "autumn" that "begins" in Martins Ferry, Ohio suggests a seasonal cycle; yet the poem's characters do not change so much as remain stuck in bitter unhappiness. In only five lines, the first stanza provides sketches of a variety of people, "Polacks nursing long beers," "Negroes" working on the floor of steel factories, and a plant's night watchman. These lines emphasize the economic causes of these men's misery. Stuck in grueling or desperately lonely jobs, they suffer from a sense of unrelenting sadness. Their lives are like the "faces of the Negroes,": "gray," bored, cheerless, and hopeless.

Calling them "Polacks" and "Negroes," "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" emphasizes the men's ethnic identities. (Only the night watchman's race and/or national origin remains undefined). These racial and ethnic differences, though, give way to larger similarities. These characters' ethnic identities differ, but they live essentially similar lives and share the same dream. They spend their days working hard and "[d]reaming of heroes."

In the grim scenes that "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" presents, economic reality trumps racial identity. For those familiar with Marxist thought, it easy to see how the poem echoes some of Marxist cultural analysis. Alienated from their labor, workers such as the "ruptured night watchman" enjoy little power over their lives. While the poem sympathetically presents members of the lower class, lower-class life is depicted as dreary. In a manner similar to classic Marxist studies of working class labor in northern England, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" depicts individuals ground down by repressive economic forces.

Part of what's striking about the opening stanza is the wealth of regional detail it presents. Its references to "the Shreve High football stadium," "Tiltonsville," "the blast furnace at Bern-wood," and "Wheeling Steel" establish Wright's interest in the

particularity of local experience. The opening lines' frame structure implicitly raises this issue. Watching a high school football game, the speaker, who soon disappears from the poem, wonders why the region so passionately competes at and follows this violent sport. As its title indicates, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" considers why certain people in a certain place live the way they do.

In the second stanza, the poem shifts from the workplace to the home. The difference between the grim reality the men endure and the fantasies they dream intensifies their sense of shame. While the first stanza suggests the economic roots of the men's misery, the second shows how this unhappiness moves into their home lives. "All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home"; ashamed of their lives, they do not want their wives and children to see them in their present condition. Instead of the "heroes" they dream of, the men see themselves as powerless. Their sense of embarrassment and disgrace makes them less capable of love, in both its physical and emotional manifestations. The result is a kind of death between husband and wife, father and mother.

As I suggested before, the poem turns on the word, "therefore," which starts the third stanza. To see the importance of this otherwise unobtrusive word, it is helpful to consider how the last stanza would differ if it began with a word similar but not quite equivalent to "therefore." For example, "so" claims the same basic dictionary definition as "[therefore." However, "so" is much more conversational than "therefore"; a speaker who uses words such as "Polacks" and "blast furnace" would be much more likely to say "so" than "therefore." Furthermore, it is difficult to hear almost any speaker talking in a casual context say, "therefore." "So how can I help you?" a shopkeeper might ask a visitor to her store, not "Therefore, how can I help you?"

In short, "therefore" is more elevated than the rather plain style that precedes. It signals a change to a grander diction which echoes a grander subject matter. In the opening stanza the men dream of heroes; in the final stanza their sons try to live these fantasies. The football game is modified with adverbs reminiscent of heroic struggle: "Their sons grow suicidally beautiful / ... And gallop terribly against each other's bodies." The language is majestic. The sons are not high school jocks wasting their time with a particularly brutish sport. Instead, they are closer to figures from a classical epic engaged in quests or characters from a Greek play doomed to act out deadly family dramas. The rhetoric inflates the football players to literally larger-than-life proportions. Horses, not people, "gallop."

"Therefore" also belongs to the language of a logical argument, whether a syllogism ("A=B and B=C. Therefore, A=C") or the rhetoric of a formal argument. According to convention "therefore" signals a conclusion. "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" traces the effects of the men's unfulfilled dreams. Shamed by the work they do and the lives they lead, the men dream of heroes and the women of love. These dreams are passed to their sons, who pursue them perhaps unknowingly. "Therefore" signals how the children are propelled by forces beyond their control. Just as the economic forces oppress their parents, their parents' unachieved hopes motivate their desire for glory. Like the third part of a logical syllogism, the boys' lives are dictated by what precedes

them: their fathers' shame and their mothers' lack of love. In the poem, the changing of the seasons seems to bring repetition of the past, not change. Similarly, the boys are fated to repeat their parents lives.

The final stanza shows how football enacts a ritual of eroticism and serf-destructive violence. The lines I quoted in a previous paragraph combine the violent and the erotic: "Their sons grow suicidally beautiful /... And gallop terribly against each other's bodies." In the world the poem presents, the desire for love can only be expressed through violence; what is beautiful must be suicidally so. At the same time, the opposite seems true, as acts of violence become loving. The poem's last word emphasizes this point. The players not only "gallop terribly against each other" but "gallop terribly against each other's *bodies"* (my italics). "[Bodies" emphasizes the paradoxically tender violence of football. In gestures of suicidal beauty, the players don't seem to want to hurt each other so much as express an otherwise inarticulate beauty. They gallop like showhorses, luxuriating in the crowd's admiration and their own power.

In a famous line, Irish poet W. B. Yeats expressed his ambivalence about the Irish Easter Rebellion, "A terrible beauty is born." The final image in "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" echoes this celebrated phrase. However, the players who "gallop terribly against each other's bodies" are not giving birth to a "terrible beauty" as Yeats despaired of the Irish Rebellion. Instead, they repeat the cycle they were born into, a pattern of unfulfilled dreams, love expressed through violence, and violence raised to the passion of love. At the start of autumn, another generation toils unhappily ever after.

Source: David Caplan, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Jeannine Johnson currently teaches writing and literature at Harvard University. She has also taught at Yale, from which she received her Ph.D., and at Wake Forest University. Her most recent essay is on Adrienne Rich's "To a Poet, " published in the **Explicator.** *In the following essay, Johnson considers Wright's use of memory and geography in "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio, " arguing that his commitment to place prevents him from inappropriately idealizing his subject.*

In "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," James Wright offers a stark but loving portrait of his postindustrial hometown. The human objects of Wright's attention are outsiders: they include "Po-lacks" and "Negroes," factory workers and neglected housewives, and an assortment of grown men living vicariously through teenage athletes. These are people who, by most social measures, have failed; or, if they succeed they do so only in their dreams and in their memories. While Wright's powers of observation are exceptionally sharp, he adopts as his poetic persona one who is not so much an observer of the scene he describes but a sympathizer within it. This poet sees too much to detach himself from these lives, and he carefully constructs his moral position as participant and artist. What might with another poet become unjust criticism is with Wright fair commentary. And while some poets might mourn for what these people and this place could never have become, Wright does not falsely idealize them. The poet does not sever the people of Martins Ferry, Ohio, from their memories and dreams nor from the harsh truths of their lives. For even though it is in the imagination□in theirs and in the poet's□that they become whole and beautiful, such visions are meaningless without their ties to reality.

Poet W. H. Auden chose Wright's first book of poems, *The Green Wall,* as the winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets award for 1957. In his foreword to that book, Auden asserts that "in Mr. Wright's poems ... the present is not unhappy but unreal, and it is memories, pleasant or unpleasant, which are celebrated for their own sake as the real past." While Wright composed "Martins Ferry" after completing *The Green Wall,* Auden's remarks illuminate the later poem as well as those in his early collection. Although the poet depicts fathers who are "ashamed," mothers who are "Dying for love," and sons who are "suicidally beautiful," the character of "Martins Ferry" tends much more toward the unreal than the unhappy. The inhabitants of this town are not so much disappointed with the present as resigned to it. The "Polacks nursing their long beers" and the "Negroes" whose faces are grayed by their shifts in front of the blast furnace do not rejoice in their fortunes, but neither do they complain about them.

There are several factors that lend an "unreal" quality to the world that Wright portrays. The "night watchman of Wheeling Steel"□a plant across the river from Martins Ferry in Wheeling, West Virginia□is "ruptured" because, instead of attending to the present, he is "Dreaming of heroes" while he performs his duties. The spectators at the football game also exist in a kind of limbo between past, present, and future: the fathers are reluctant to leave even after the game is finished because returning home means returning to the present, abandoning the realm of the imagination and the glories of the

past. Temporality is confused even in the structure of the poem. In the first line of the poem, the poet announces his position "In the Shreve High football stadium." But in the next line, he mentally takes leave of the stadium in order to think about others in the town. In the second stanza, the poet returns to the football field, but only after the game is over. The poem ends in the third stanza at an intermediary moment, during the game itself, when the sons of Martins Ferry "grow suicidally beautiful" and "gallop terribly against each other's bodies." The simple present tense of the verbs "grow" and "gallop" suggests a kind of stasis, as if these actions have no beginning and no end. This is a situation that those in the stands might wish for: a never-ending game and an uninterrupted distraction from their lives. However, the verb tense implies not only continual motion but a repeated action, and it seems to signal that memory will never erase reality, and that the condition of this town and its inhabitants will never change.

Martins Ferry's spiritual condition will never change, despite the certainty of constant technological progress (represented in the poem by the mills and factories). In his foreword to *The Green Wall,* Auden notes that Wright often confronts the fact that modern human "society ha[s] a serf-made history while the rest of nature does not." In other words, our vocations and lives are no longer based in the rural but in the industrial-technological world, and thus we have lost our necessary link to nature and its particular kind of ahistorical cycles. "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry" confirms this situation. The title of Wright's poem suggests an essential connection between the change of seasons and the people of this small Ohio town. However, the poem reveals that the natural seasons and human lives develop independently of each other: technology will advance and the mechanization of modern life will continue, but not according to any calendar determined by nature. The people of Martins Ferry attempt to reunite with the organic year through the seasons of sports. Through football, they achieve the reassurances of predictability and the comforts of a diversion from everyday activities. Nevertheless, the reconciliation with nature is incomplete at best, and the violence of the game impairs its consolatory capacities.

The poem's subject is typical of Wright's mature work, in which he frequently addresses themes of deficiency, estrangement, and alienation. It is also common for him to use as his setting the Midwest, the place of his birth and the region where he spent the greater part of his life. He was born and raised in Ohio and attended Kenyon College. Later, Wright taught at the University of Minnesota and at Macalester College in St. Paul, and many of his poem titles mention such cities as Minneapolis, Chicago, Pine Island (Minnesota), and Fargo (North Dakota). But Wright seems most personally invested in his vision when he returns to his home state. In "Many of our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child" (1969), Wright addresses the Ohio River: "Oh my back-broken beloved Ohio. /I, too, was beautiful, once, / Just like you. / We were both still a little / Young, then. / Now, all I am is a poet, / Just like you." Here the poet revisits the complicated relationship between the past and the present□between memory and reality□ and he attests that poetry springs naturally from geographical place. He also reiterates that beauty, though perhaps degraded, is never fully destroyed and can always be dredged up, even from a "back-broken" river. In this poem as in "Martins Ferry," Wright refuses to correct imperfections and in so doing he defies the artificiality of nostalgia and false memory.

Throughout his life, Wright was affiliated with formal educational institutions, and he received many awards from established, high-brow sources. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Washington, where he studied with the poet Theodore Roethke. The year after John Ashbery won the prestigious Yale Series award, Wright won the same prize. He spent much of his life teaching at colleges and universities, wrote reviews and criticism for scholarly journals, and won the Pulitzer Prize for his *Collected Poems* (1971).

However, though Wright moved easily in academic circles, his poetry resists over-intellectualization. A poem such as "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," written relatively early in Wright's career, is especially accessible to a non-scholarly audience. He is frequently quoted as saying that he "wanted to make the poems say something humanly important instead of just showing off with the language." His dedication to the human element does not force him to compromise his facility with language, as he demonstrates in "Martins Ferry": "All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home. / Their women cluck like starved pullets, / Dying for love." Here the poet compresses into two short sentences the reaction of the fans after they have witnessed their team lose a football game. The brevity of Wright's statements is intension with the expanse of emotional devastation that these people feel when their only release from the ordinary fails to satisfy them. The only unusual word in these lines is "pullets," a term Wright uses instead of "chickens" likely because it is more delicate and supple. In addition, "pullets" is a term used to refer specifically to young chickens. By identifying the youthfulness of the women, Wright verifies that already their lives have become prematurely□and inevitably□routine.

Yet this poem marks a beginning (of autumn) as well as an end (of idealized youth), and though the poem's scene is somewhat bleak, its tone is not despairing. Rodney Phillips, a curator of English and American literature at the New York Public Library, has maintained that Wright's "voice became one of the sweetest of the age, his great subject the heart's passage to the deepest interior consciousness, to the moment of perfect awareness, of pure being and of pure enlightenment." But in Wright's poems one never achieves this purity of self-knowledge without first grounding oneself in a particular geographical place. Location is not merely an ornament in Wright's poetry but provides an integral part of its meaning, and poetry is not compensation for reality but is a means by which to unearth reality's rough beauty.

Source: Jeannine Johnson, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Bruce Meyer is the director of the creative writing program at the University of Toronto. He has taught at several Canadian universities and is the author of three collections of poetry. In the following essay, Meyer analyzes how Wright captures the "poetry" of the game of football in "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio. "

Ubiquitous in the American landscape, in every city and small town, is the football stadium. As one flies over the nation on an autumn night, the eye is immediately drawn to the rectangles of light, the football fields of local high schools and colleges. Football is to the American consciousness what chivalry was to the Middle Ages. It is both a male code of behavior and a social ritual. Like the runner who was the pride of his town in A. E. Hous-man's "To An Athlete Dying Young," football is a means by which towns are united behind their champions. The poetry is in the game and the game is raw, brutal, and highly imagistic. The good catch, the hard tackle, the gleaming helmets of the offensive and defensive lines all bespeak a kind of gladiatorial splendor, a test of strength for the participants, and a beautiful spectacle of Aristotelian proportions for the beholder. In a 1979 conversation with Dave Smith *in American Poetry Review,* James Wright commented on his poem "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," in which he describes the annual ritual of the football season and the impact it has on small American towns. For Wright, the game of football was a great, De Toc-quevillian leveler of the classes, a world where, in the very Jeffersonian sense, men were not only created equal but made equal through their own abilities. "In my home town, Martin's Ferry, Ohio, people were quite strikingly separated from each other along class lines. It is difficult to talk about class in America because we have the powerful myth of the common man, the myth of the absence of any class distinction.... What a startling experience it is to be a young American conditioned, to a certain extent, to believe we have no class distinctions in American society, then suddenly to get into the army and realize, if you are an enlisted man, that an officer, even a second lieutenant, for all practical purposes and down to the smallest detail, is regarded—and you regard him—almost as a distinct species." For Wright, the game of football in his hometown of Martins Ferry, Ohio, as he recalls it in his poem, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," is a seasonal ritual where the value of an individual is measured in that most American of ways—through performance.

Wright commented in the same interview that he perceived the value of those games as "occasions for the expression of physical grace." Indeed, in the poem, there is something recognizably magnificent and tragically beautiful in the way the young men of the town "gallop terribly against each other's bodies" in the annual autumn ritual. It is that sense of poetry, an almost haiku-like precision and focus that borders on the ritualistic, that Wright attempts to capture in the poem.

As is the case with many of Wright's poems, the entire work is crafted around the application of sharp, focused images that carry the weight of a statement that borders on narrative. Almost a series of tableaux, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," presents several "scenes" of life in the town revolving around the game of football and

the working classes for whom the game is the great social leveler: the "Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville," the "gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood," the "ruptured night watchman of Wheeling Steel." They are all "dreaming of heroes." For them, the game is an alternative reality beyond the confines of their daily existence, and like a religion they perceive the actions of football as a ritual bordering on martyrdom.

What lies at the root of this "ritual" is, as Wright terms it, a kind of passion where the "sons grow suicidally beautiful / At the beginning of October." There is a sense, just as there is in Hous-man's poem, that the champions are martyrs and that their sacrifice is reminiscent of the Adonis/ Tammuz myth where the protagonist must die to ensure life and renewal for his society. The word "gallop" in the final line seems to suggest that the young men, the "sons," are like animals being led to a slaughter, and the seasonal theme ties the "galloping" and "suicidal beauty," to the autumnal rituals of the harvest and Samhain. What must be remembered is that the Celtic festival of Samhain, the traditional root of the Halloween celebration, was originally a slaughter festival when the fattened and beautiful animals were ritualistically killed for a feast in order to save the precious feed grains for human consumption during the long winter months. At the root of Wright's rather elliptical perceptions of the football ritual is a sense of a bloodsport, or at least a blood ritual, where sacrifice and martyrdom lurk behind the images with a eerie sense of unspoken presence. It is this 'presence,' this sense of haunting, that makes the poem so intriguing□just as the game itself, its imaginative associations and poetic perceptions offer an alternative reality to both players and spectators alike.

The middle stanza of the poem reinforces the idea of football as an escape from reality. The first stanza, in its rather documentary use of the images of working class occupation, shows the dignity inherent in hard, physical labor. The second stanza, however, underscores the difficulty and banality of the working class life. The "proud fathers" are "ashamed to go home," a strange statement that suggests both the agony of defeat and the focused elevation and esteem in which they venerate the game. The suggestion here is that the difference between the banal reality of home life and the heightened reality of the game are absurdly distant for those "proud fathers." The gap between the two realities is underscored further by the delightfully absurd image of the "women" who are "like starved pullets / Dying for love." These hen-like creatures are both delightful and absurd in that they express the same sense of driving, passionate desire that the fathers and sons express through their devotion to the sport.

It is this sense of passion, of an unspoken undercurrent of desire, that is the most haunting element of the poem. True to Wright's vision of working-class virtues, what must be said cannot be said in words but in the poetry of motion and performance, whether that performance takes place in the reality of a daily job or in the playful, imaginative "sport" of the game of football. It is the power of the imagination in raw, physical action that so attracts and fascinates the poem's persona. After all, the first line of the poem locates the entire work in the imagination. As the persona sits in the "Shreve High football stadium," he "thinks" of the reality behind the game and forms a list of all those workmen who toil at their various occupations. This sense of physical dedication to a purpose is the poetry in the process of the poem. The images unfold not as a poetic record of the passion and the pride that the figures in the poem bring to both

the game and to life, but as a series of pointers that allude to the depth of living and action that lie embedded in every deed. The beauty of the "suicidal sons" is not just in the downs and plays on the field, or in the score on the board, but in the living and the imaginative aspirations that those of the world around the game pour into the yards and downs. For Wright, poetry is not just the images or the narrative but the meaning one brings to the structures and ideas of a work□and it is this process, of bringing meaning to something one believes in that lies at the core of our most profound and spiritually driven desires. Football is a religion, and as far as Wright is concerned in this poem, so is poetry. Both present the structures into which a huge amount of experience can be read, and both leave the beholder searching for more meaning, more interpretation and more imaginative possibilities.

Source: Bruce Meyer, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Adaptations

Hear James Wright read "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" by clicking on the "Hear It!" icon at: www.poets.org/lit/poem/jwrigh01 .htm.

A 47-minute cassette was recorded by James Wright in 1976-77 entitled "Poetry and Voice of James Wright." This tape includes 24 poems, but it is now out of print and very difficult to find.

Topics for Further Study

Consider whether you enjoy more and understand better poems that are written in free verse or in a formal (rhymed, metered) style. Explain why you prefer one over the other and how one style may be more difficult to read than the other.

Report on how your community views its local athletic teams and the effects that any suspected illegal acts (paying players, recruiting violations, etc.) has had or would likely have on the social climate surrounding local sports.

Write an essay on how you think most immigrants to the United States felt upon their arrival and how those feelings may have changed over time.

Pretend you have just retired from a factory where you worked for 50 years and write a letter to a grandchild telling him or her how you now feel.

Compare and Contrast

1948: Only 33 percent of all adults in the United States graduated from high school.

1963: The high school graduation rate increases to 46 percent.

Today: Eighty percent of U.S. adults hold high-school diplomas.

1929: Pop Warner Little Scholars, a national youth football program, is founded in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

1947: Pop Warner hosts its first National Championship event.

1998: Pop Warner has leagues in 38 U.S. states.

Today: Pop Warner is in 1,400 communities nationwide; the NFL Players' Association estimates that 60 to 79 percent of NFL players took part in Pop Warner football.

1970s-1990s: Total participation in high-school football hovers around one million.

Today: Football remains the largest male-participant, high-school sport in the United States.

What Do I Read Next?

James Wright's first published collection of poems, *The Green Wall* (1957), and his second, *Saint Judas* (1959), make for interesting comparison to his third book, *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963), which includes "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio." After reading the first two and then the third, one can easily see his change in style and understand what sent many poetry critics to their opposing corners.

To a Blossoming Pear Tree (1977) was Wright's last collection published before his death. The poems in it represent yet another departure from style, in the form of prose poems. Many of these brief "paragraphs" of descriptions were inspired by Wright's visits to Europe, particularly Italy, and their images portray his love of the countryside there, as well as its people. Never far from home in thought, though, the poet also included in this collection several poems that make mention of Ohio.

Today, sports fans are not as naive as they may have been in the past when it comes to high school and college athletics and the corruption that sometimes permeates both. Rick Telander, former writer for *Sports Illustrated,* examines the myths that surround sports□college football in particular□in his *The Hundred Yard Lie* (1989). This is a tell-all account from a person who has spent much of his career dealing with the world of athletics in America.

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Many say this act ended America's "age of innocence" that occurred in the 1950s. Michael L. Kurtz's *Crime of the Century: The Kennedy Assassination from a Historian's Perspective* (1982) offers an account of the crime that is free of sensationalism and the "yellow journalism" that has often permeated the hundreds of others books and articles on Kennedy's death.

Teacher and former *Chicago Tribune* columnist Robert Wolf collects the writings of people seldom read or heard in *An American Mosaic: Prose and Poetry by Everyday Folk* (1999). This book includes writings by America's rural citizens whose lives have been determined by harsh economics, as well as poems and stories by homeless men and women.

Further Study

Bly, Robert, *Remembering James Wright, St*. Paul: Ally

Press, 1991.

This is friend Robert Bly's long account of Wright's life. Although not an official "biography," it depicts both the poet's public and private life, including material about the painful break-up of his first marriage.

Morgan, Bruce, "In Ohio: A Town and the Bard Who Left

It," *Time,* Oct. 19, 1987, pp. 9-10.

Although only a brief article, it is interesting to read about Wright's reputation in his hometown of Martins Ferry. The article includes quotations from members of the poet's family.

Wright, James, *Above the River: The Complete Poems,* Mid-dletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1990. In addition to being a collection of Wright's entire published works, this book contains an exceptional introduction by contemporary poet Donald Hall. Hall was a close friend of James Wright, and he tells a compelling story of some of the poet's best days, some of his worst days, and the day of his death.

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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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