Beowulf Study Guide

Beowulf by Richard Wilbur

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Contents

Introduction

"Beowulf" appeared in Richard Wilbur's second volume of poetry, *Ceremony and Other Poems* (1950), the book that established him as one of the preeminent American poets of his generation. In this poem, Wilbur retells part of an Old English epic, or long narrative poem, also called "Beowulf." He describes the hero of the ancient poem from a mid-twentieth century point of view.

The epic "Beowulf" was written between the mid-seventh and the late tenth centuries A.D. It tells the story of a Scandinavian hero, Beowulf, who comes to save a kingdom from a monster named Grendel who attacks the castle each night. The hero fights and kills the monster; soon Grendel's mother appears, and Beowulf must defeat her as well. The Danes give Beowulf many gifts in thanks, and he returns home, where he is king of the Geats for fifty years. He eventually dies in a battle against a dragon.

Wilbur shows Beowulf as a melancholy hero. He bravely promises to fight the monster, but he also is aware that being a hero can be a lonely job. Despite his courageous deeds, he is isolated from other people, who cannot really understand him. Even the Danes, whom he saves, are remote from him. While the epic poem celebrates the heroic ideal, Wilbur's poem reveals the hero as a human being living in a less than perfect world.

Attending Amherst College in Massachusetts from 1938 to 1942, Wilbur studied literature in the then-popular method of New Criticism. New Critics encouraged poets to write in traditional forms while expressing the discord of modern life. Wilbur served as the editor of the student newspaper and published some poems, stories, and editorials in college publications. During the summers, he traveled around the country, hitchhiking and "riding the rails" - catching free rides on freight trains.

In 1942 Wilbur married Charlotte Hayes Ward, then joined the U.S. Army to serve in Europe in World War II. He began to write poems more frequently while in the army. Writing helped him, he said, make order out of the chaos he was experiencing. He sent poems to his wife and a few friends; at the end of the war these were published in his first book, *The Beautiful Changes.* Upon returning home, Wilbur went to graduate school at Harvard, and embarked on a university teaching career that lasted nearly forty years. In addition to teaching at Harvard, Wellesley College, Wesleyan University, and Smith College, Wilbur served as Poet Laureate of the United States from 1987 to 1988.

Wilbur is often seen as a poet of affirmation, one who has a bright and witty view of the world. "Beowulf," then, is somewhat different from the poet's other work in its tone and subject matter, though it is similar in its formal structure and musical rhythm. The power of this poem may come from Wilbur's exploration of a dark side of existence, in spite of his natural inclination to celebrate the details that make life worthwhile.

Author Biography

Richard Wilbur was born in New York City on March 1, 1921, to Lawrence L. Wilbur, a portrait painter, and Helen Purdy Wilbur, whose father and grandfather had been newspaper editors. Wilbur felt influences from both sides of his family. He enjoyed drawing and creating cartoons when he was young, but he also had a passion for words. His interests were combined when he began writing poems, since he uses vivid visual images in his poetry.

When he was two, Wilbur moved with his family to rural New Jersey. They rented a pre-Revolutionary War stone house on a four-hundred-acre estate owned by an English millionaire. Growing up in this environment, Wilbur developed his awareness of and appreciation for nature, which is evident in many of his poems.

Poem Text

The land was overmuch like scenery,

The flowers attentive, the grass to garrulous green;

In the lake like a dropped kerchief could be seen

The lark's reflection after the lark was gone;

The Roman road lay paved too shiningly   5

For a road so many men had traveled on.

Also the people were strange, were strangely

warm.

The king recalled the father of his guest,

The queen brought mead in a studded cup, the rest

Were kind, but in all was a vagueness and a strain,   10

Because they lived in a land of daily harm.

And they said the same things again and again.

It was a childish country; and a child,

Grown monstrous. So besieged them in the night

That all their daytimes were a dream of fright   15

That it would come and own them to the bone.

The hero, to his battle reconciled,

Promised to meet that monster all alone.

So then the people wandered to their sleep

And left him standing in the echoed hall.   20

They heard the rafters rattle fit to fall,

The child departing with a broken groan,

And found their champion in a rest so deep

His head lay harder sealed than any stone.

The land was overmuch like scenery,   25

The lake gave up the lark, but now its song Fell to no ear, the flowers too were wrong,

The day was fresh and pale and swiftly old,

The night put out no smiles upon the sea;

And the people were strange, the people strangely   30

cold.

They gave him horse and harness, helmet and mail,

A jeweled shield, and ancient battle-sword,

Such gifts as are the hero's hard reward

And bid him do again what he has done.

These things he stowed beneath his parting sail,   35

And wept that he could share them with no son.

He died in his own country a kinless king,

A name heavy with deeds, and mourned as one

Will mourn for the frozen year when it is done.

They buried him next to sea on a thrust of land: 40

Twelve men rode round his barrow all in a ring,

Singing of him what they could understand.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1:

The poem opens with a description of the country that Beowulf has come to save. The speaker of the poem seems to be an unseen narrator who is describing this scene from the hero's point of view. There is something too perfect about the natural world; the land is like artificial scenery on a stage. The flowers and the grass seem to have human characteristics; they appear "attentive," or overly polite, and "garrulous," or too talkative. The lake is so still that the reflection of a bird remains after the bird has flown away. The road, built during the days of the now-fallen Roman Empire, seems untraveled. These images of the physical world have an unreal quality, creating a sense of mystery about this country.

Stanza 2:

Here the speaker introduces the people of the country. Like their land, they are strange, though they are hospitable to Beowulf. The king says that he had known Beowulf's father. Offering thanks for his help, the queen serves the hero mead, a wine made from honey, in a cup decorated with jewels. These details are similar to ones that appear in the original epic poem.

The other people have a "vagueness," which may mean that they don't think very clearly, or that they cannot be clearly seen, like shadows. They live in fear of "daily harm," which refers to the nightly attacks by the monster Grendel. This fear causes the people to repeat themselves when they speak. The strangeness of the residents adds to the atmosphere of mystery about this country.

Stanza 3:

At the beginning of this stanza, the "childish country" appears to refer to the childlike nature of the people. However, the "child / Grown monstrous" describes Grendel, who is a giant monster but also the child of a monster. Since he attacks the castle each night, the people are always afraid. In addition, because Grendel eats those he kills, people fear that he will "own them to the bone." Beowulf determines that he will fight the monster alone, so that others will not risk death.

The poet may have more than one meaning here. The people spend their days afraid of what will happen when night comes. Grendel, according to the Old English poem, lives in the wilderness outside the borders of the kingdom. Wilbur may be implying that the people's "dream of fright" is fear of the unknown. The hero, however, is willing to confront the mystery symbolized by the monster.

Stanza 4:

Wilbur condenses much of the action from the original poem in this stanza. In lines 19-20, he describes how the Danes go off to bed, leaving Beowulf alone to face the monster. The hall is "echoed" because it is a large, high-ceilinged room in the castle. When a crowd is feasting and celebrating there, the noise is very loud. When the hall is empty, it may echo with the slightest sound. Beowulf is a lonely figure standing in this great hall by himself, waiting for the monster. In addition, according to the epic poem, the sounds of human happiness in this hall first attract Grendel's anger, causing him to come and kill those in the castle.

Lines 21-22 describe the fight between Beowulf and Grendel. The fierce battle shakes the beams supporting the roof. Beowulf is so strong he defeats Grendel without using weapons; instead, he pulls the monster's arm completely off his body. The "child" - Grendel - leaves, groaning and dying.

When the fight is over, the Danes find Beowulf in an exhausted sleep. His head is "sealed" because he does not wake up for a long time, and no one knows what he is thinking or feeling. In the original poem, Beowulf fights not only Grendel, but Grendel's mother, who comes to avenge her child's death. Then the hero falls into a deep sleep.

Stanza 5:

The speaker returns to a description of the landscape. However, the country is apparently changed by the monster's death. It is still "overmuch like scenery," as in the first stanza, but now it is not friendly. The lark is free of the lake, but its song is silent. The day passes too quickly and the night offers no welcome. Line 30 echoes line 7, describing the people as strange. Here, though, they are cold instead of warm. It may be that now that they feel safe, they do not care about the hero as much as before.

The country seems to have lost its childishness when its child monster dies. In the first stanza, the land seemed too new, like the road "paved too shiningly" in line 5. In this fifth stanza, the day is "swiftly old." The people may have lost their innocence. While they had their monster, they could blame all their problems on an outside element. Now they have to look inside themselves to find out why the lark's song is not heard, or why the flowers are wrong.

However, since the speaker seems to be describing the adventure from Beowulf's point of view, this change in the land and its inhabitants may come from the hero's own feelings. Perhaps he is so tired from the battle that the country seems unfriendly. Perhaps he believes his effort was so great that the people cannot truly appreciate what he has gone through. Or, he may feel that since his task is over, he is no longer welcome and should leave.

Stanza 6:

The people are not unappreciative, as this stanza shows. They shower Beowulf with valuable presents as a reward for his rescue of their kingdom. All of these gifts are needed by a warrior-hero - a horse, armor, and weapons. The speaker hints that by giving Beowulf these things, the people are encouraging him to fight other battles, to "do again what he has done." This may imply that the hero would prefer to rest after his great deed, but cannot because everyone expects him to do more great deeds. He may also have these expectations of himself.

Beowulf takes his presents and sails home. He is lonely despite his victory, because he has no son to leave his treasure to. The hero believes in the tradition of children carrying on the name of the father and honoring his accomplishments after his death. Beowulf may weep because he fears no one will remember him after he dies, since he has no son.

Stanza 7:

In this stanza the speaker most reveals Beowulf's isolation from the world. He becomes king of the Geats, but when he dies he has no family members left. He is famous for his brave deeds, and he is mourned, but his is a lonely death. He is buried at the edge of the sea, which is an in-between place, suitable for someone who lived outside the mainstream of the community. Although some of his followers ride around his barrow, or burial mound, and sing at his funeral, they do not fully understand him. Wilbur may be saying that a hero - or anyone who does great deeds - is never completely understood by the people around him.

Summary

The first stanza of the poem describes the landscape of a country as seen through the eyes of visitors. The poet compares the land to scenery, which suggests a fake, lifeless appearance. The flowers stand straight and tall, and the grass is unnaturally green, as though people have not traveled through the area in a long time. The lake has been forgotten--like a lost handkerchief. Animals no longer visit the area. A lark's song is nothing more than a reflection or memory. The paved, Roman road, which should have been well worn from travel, now stands shining in the sun. The entire landscape appears abandoned by the people of the country. They have left the area untouched and un-traveled. The lack of human contact has cast an eerie strangeness across the country.

In Stanza Two, the reader and the visitor learn that the strangeness found in the landscape is mirrored in the people. Instead of challenging the visitor's arrival, the people are "strangely warm." The generous welcome of the king and queen seems almost unexpected. The king and queen observe traditional customs afforded guests. The king offers kind words about the visitor's father and the queen brings an ornamented cup of mead. The other people in the hall are pleasant but exude an air of caution. As the people repeat themselves in conversation, the hero learns that they are threatened by a "daily struggle." Their lives have been disrupted, so that they, like the scenery, no longer act naturally.

The Third Stanza, details the reason for the bizarre landscape and odd behavior of the people. The foreign land is "childish." It is wild and untamed, vulnerable and unprotected. One man mirrors the land. He is a child allowed to grow free and unrestrained. This child now terrorizes the people every night. His actions are so horrendously frightening that the people live in fear even during the daytime. They worry that the monster will not be content with his nighttime raiding and begin to torment their days. The people are not the only ones afraid of the monster. His presence in the area is the cause of the strange landscape. As the stranger listens to the people talk, he resolves to face the fiend in solitary battle. The visitor has come to this foreign land to prove his heroic nature and this monster represents a fantastic opportunity to gain great fame and wealth.

As night falls in the Fourth Stanza, the people seek sleep in places outside the hall. The hero remains alone in the empty building. The reader can deduce that the hall plays an important role in the monster's terrifying visits. There is a mysterious, unexplained connection between the fiend and the people's gathering place. The hero seems confident that the monstrous child will find him in the hall. Similarly, the people appear to find some degree of comfort and safety by sleeping in outbuildings. In accordance with these assumptions, the monster attacks the hall as the people sleep and the hero waits. The people listen to the sounds of battle raging within the hall from their remote shelters. The fight is so intense that the rafters shake loudly as if the building will collapse. The monster groans loudly as he runs away wounded. When the people return

to the hall they find the champion in a deep sleep resulting from his exhausting encounter.

Stanza Five again describes the land. A marked change has taken place as a result of the battle between monster and hero. The landscape is still compared to scenery: fake and lifeless. However, the lake has released the forgotten lark, although no one hears the bird's song. Instead of flowers that are oddly attentive and grass that appears unnatural, the land seems to have relaxed. The time lost while the entire region stood in fear of the monster is now passing swiftly. The day is fresh and the night no longer holds the horrific face of the monster. The people are still strange but now they are cold instead of warm. The people can relax now that the monster is gone. They are able to feel and experience the world around them. They no longer need to live in fear and caution.

In Stanza Six, the hero receives great treasures as reward for battling the monster. The ancient battle-sword he accepts is probably an heirloom of significance to its giver. The type and amount of gifts given indicate that the hero has performed a considerable service for the native people. The fourth line of the stanza presents some confusion for the reader. The people may be asking the champion to perform another daring deed, or they may be extending an invitation for him to return to their country anytime. Considering that the hero takes the treasure and secures it in his boat in preparation for departure, the second possibility seems more plausible. The reader is also given a brief glimpse into the hero's personality in this stanza. The last line states that he weeps because he has no heir to share his victory or bounty with upon his return home.

The final stanza tells the reader how the hero's life ends. He dies in his own country still without a family. The fact that the hero has no heir is made more poignant by the revelation that he has created a great name for himself as a result of numerous brave deeds. There is no one left behind to carry on the hero's name or actions. The hero's people bury him on a promontory overlooking the sea. From this location, he may continue to look over the land and coast he protected in life. Twelve men ride in a ring around the champion's grave showing their respect. As they ride they sing a song about their leader. Despite the great status achieved by the hero in life, the people still know little about him personally. They sing of "him what they could understand." All that seems to be known about this man are his great deeds. Even in death, the details of the hero's personality remain a mystery.

Analysis

The original Old English poem describing the life of Beowulf is over 3000 lines long and encapsulates all the power of Anglo-Saxon culture: the traditions of welcoming guests with mead cups and stories, bestowing rich treasures as reward for great deeds, and honoring the memory of fallen heroes. Richard Wilbur's interpretation is under fifty lines and yet lacks none of the fear, excitement, and majesty of the original. Wilbur does not include many of the rich detail found in the epic-length version. He does not name the king or queen or the monster. Indeed, although the poem is titled *Beowulf*, he does not

clearly identify which character is Beowulf. However, Wilbur brings new dimensions to the poem that should not be ignored by casual readers or serious scholars.

Wilbur creates a heightened quality of mystery and fear by emphasizing the interconnectedness of the land, the people, and the monster. The fiend's terror extends beyond the people and is felt by the very soil of the countryside. This monster must be horrible beyond imagination if he can make flowers and grass appear artificial. The unnaturalness of the child grown wild is magnified by Wilbur's descriptions of the landscape before and after the battle. Not only do the people act strangely while the monster is able to roam but so do the animals and plant life. Once Beowulf has mortally wounded the beast, the entire country - plant, animal, and human - is able to relax and begin the return to normal existence. The monster has held the entire region captive through fear and intimidation. Time stands still until the creature is defeated and the earth is able to breath easy again.

The interrelated relationships between characters in the poem can also be seen in the change in the description of the people from "strangely warm" to "strangely cold." Wilbur's wording of this change is difficult to comprehend. The key to comprehending Wilbur's meaning seems to come from the connection between the monster and the land. The living monster creates a heightened sense of awareness where all life forms seem to be constantly peering over their shoulders waiting for the next attack. The monster's death liberates the people, allowing them to feel natural emotions again. At first glance, the reader may assume that the people have gone from warmly welcoming the hero to coldly bidding him good-bye. However, it seems that the assumption should be that the people are peculiarly cold only in comparison to their unnatural state of awareness at the beginning of the poem. The description does not appear to relate to their treatment of the hero but to their own way of living.

While Wilbur creates areas of confusion for the reader, he also captures several of the frustrations the reader may experience while reading the original epic. The epic provides no specific clues as to the origin of the monster, Grendel; however, Wilbur has created a plausible back-story of explanation. Wilbur speculates about the monster's origin as a human child maturing unrestrained. Not only does Wilbur's version provide new insight into the world of the monster, but he considers the personality of his hero. The line which mentions the hero's grief over his lack of a son is not found in the original poem, but creates a slight human quality for this unbreakable man. These additions enrich the story by creatively answering questions raised in the original without degrading the sentiment of the original. Richard Wilbur's interpretation of the Beowulf legend compliments the original poem by adding depth and possibility to the Anglo-Saxon epic and should be considered a valuable contribution to any survey of the original.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

In describing the adventures of the legendary Beowulf, Wilbur provides him with the sensibilities of a mid-twentieth century person: the hero feels alienated from the rest of society. Beowulf does brave deeds and is appreciated for his courage, but he is isolated from his fellow human beings. He is not an ordinary member of the community, and he has no close family member or friend with whom he can share his feelings. This isolation makes him feel alienated and lonely, even though□

or because□he is a hero and king. Whereas the Old English hero is a member of his community, because the society of that time included warrior bands and small kingdoms often at war, the modern Beowulf may be an outsider in a world that wants to view peace as normal and war as an aberration.

Beowulf risks his life fighting the monster, but this very act sets him apart from those he saves. He must meet the "monster all alone," because everyone else is too afraid. After the battle, Beowulf falls into a deep sleep, his head "harder sealed than any stone." Since he has had an experience no one else has had, he cannot share his feelings with anyone. This situation alienates him from other people. The loneliness apparently continues for his entire life, for when he dies he is still not understood by those who mourn him.

The hero's alienation can be further illustrated by examining other themes. Each of the following themes reveals how Beowulf is alienated from society, whether he feels lonely because of the situation or because of his own perception of the situation.

Duty and Responsibility

Wilbur suggests that Beowulf does not question his duties and responsibilities as a hero. However, the poet implies that the hero's assumption of these responsibilities causes his feeling of alienation.

Beowulf is "to his battle reconciled"; that is, he accepts the duty of fighting the monster whether or not doing so may lead to his own death. He takes the responsibility of fighting the monster alone, without help, so that no one else may be harmed. The people are willing to let him take this responsibility; they go to bed and leave him alone to his fate. When he has saved them, they give him many gifts in thanks. However, even these presents are evidence of his continued duty and responsibility. He is given a horse, armor, and weapons, objects that will help him to take on further duties and responsibilities as a hero. He is expected□and expects of himself□to go fight more monsters. As the last stanza shows, he becomes a king and continues to achieve great heroic deeds, though always somewhat separated from other people. His acceptance of his responsibility to other people also makes him alienated from these same people.

Appearances and Reality

The speaker of the poem appears to interpret the events from Beowulf's point of view. Therefore, it may be hard for the reader to distinguish whether a description is objective or colored by Beowulf s feelings. For example, do the people really change their behavior after the monster is killed? The second stanza describes them as "strangely warm," while the fifth stanza calls them "strangely cold." Do they change, or is Beowulf himself changed by the experience? Do the people keep themselves apart from him, or does he just believe that they do? Wilbur does not tell us directly whether this version of events is realistic or is based on Beowulf or the speaker's interpretation of events.

Likewise, the idea of childishness reflects the theme of appearances and reality. The speaker says that it is a "childish country." This may mean that the people are childish in their fear of the monster. There may not even be a real monster; it may be only a symbol of the people's fear of the dark, since it only attacks at night. In addition, the monster itself is described as a child, though a huge and mean child. When Beowulf destroys the child/monster, the country loses its childishness as well.

Wilbur is exploring a theme that goes beyond Beowulf's story. He is asking how we can distinguish appearances from reality. He indicates that any story may be told from each observer's or participant' s point of view, and the point of view will determine how the story is told.

Nature and Its Meaning

Wilbur uses nature imagery to reflect undercurrents in the events of the poem. The first stanza shows Beowulf's first impression of the land. It is too perfect and has an unreal quality. The old Roman road seems untraveled, perhaps because no one comes to this country out of fear of the monster. The "attentive" flowers and "garrulous" grass reveal how the country needs Beowulf's help. The oddness of the land is the result of the monster's presence.

The nature imagery in the fifth stanza has a different purpose. Here it may be revealing the hero's alienation or the shift in the country's perception of the hero. While it still has an unreal quality, the landscape has changed. The day is "swiftly old," and the flowers are "wrong." The reader might expect that the natural world would show happiness, or relief, but instead it is a depressing place, unwelcoming.

Style

Chronological order. The tone is formal, in keeping with the account of a hero. However, Wilbur is not writing a story so much as a character study of Beowulf, or of all heroes. The most dramatic event - the battle with the monster - takes only two lines of the poem. The stanzas reveal the atmosphere of the hero's experience, but they do not provide much detail about the actual adventures.

The rhyme scheme is the same for each stanza. Using the letters a, b, and c to denote the end rhyme of each line, the rhyme scheme is a, b, b, c, a, c. For example, in the last stanza the final words of each line are king, one, done, land, ring, and understand. This consistent pattern of rhyming helps create the formal effect of the poem. It also makes some language in the poem sound inevitable. For instance, in the fifth stanza the last line ends in "cold," rhyming with the fourth line's "old."

The meter, or rhythm, of the poem is not quite as consistent as the rhyme scheme. A line of poetry can be divided into feet. Each foot has a pattern of light and heavy stresses, according to the way the words are read. In "Beowulf," most of the lines are iambic pentameter; each foot has one light stress followed by a heavy stress, and there are five feet in each line. Line 17 is iambic pentameter: The_ he_ ro_, to_ his_ bat_ tle_ rec_ on_ ciled_. *[NOTE: the scanning symbols follow the syllables they should be directly over.]* However, other lines break out of this meter. Line 30, for example, has two almost-equal parts: "And the people were strange, the people strangely cold." Here the rhythm is similar to the rhythm common in Old English poems, in which there is a pause in the middle of the line. The reader pauses between "strange" and "the." Wilbur is paying tribute to the original poem in constructing some of the lines in this way.

Historical Context

The epic *Beowulf,* written between the mid-seventh and the late tenth centuries A.D., tells of the adventures of a high-ranking warrior of the Geats, a tribe located in Sweden. Hearing of a kingdom in Denmark that is threatened by a monster, Beowulf sails across the sea to rescue the people. He fights and kills two monsters, then returns to the land of the Geats.

Wilbur's response to the epic is to change the Anglo-Saxon attitude toward heroes into a world-weary postwar sensibility. While he retains the original setting, he incorporates modern feelings into his lyric retelling. The critic Bruce Michelson sees the dreaminess of the landscape and its inhabitants as "dreams which have turned toward nightmare" - a possible reference to events of World War II. According to critic Rodney Edgecombe, Wilbur takes the repetition of language that is common in epic poetry and conceives of it as the failure of language to capture inscrutable ideas. This view reflects the disorder and lack of harmony in modern life.

Critical Overview

When *Ceremony and Other Poems,* the book in which "Beowulf" first appeared, was published, the critic Joseph Bennett called Wilbur the "strongest poetic talent" of his generation. He singled out "Beowulf," calling it a "curious and disturbing vision which partakes of the nature of a poetic charm." Others acknowledge Wilbur's poetic workmanship; poet-critic Louise Bogan writes that he had proved himself a "subtle lyricist of the first order." Writing in the *New York Times Book Review,* Babette Deutsch notes his "musicianly skill." In further analysis, she describes the poems as "alive with light," yet "apt to close upon a somber chord, to admit an intrusive shadow."

Without denying Wilbur's ability, some critics feel he was too cautious in his writing. Randall Jarrell, reviewing the book in the *Partisan Review,* remarks that the "poems are all Scenes, none of them dramatic." He states that Wilbur "never goes too far, but he never goes far enough." This perception of Wilbur as a master of meter and rhyme who is too subdued in expressing the dark side of existence has persisted throughout his career.

However, more in-depth criticism over time has revealed fuller dimensions of Wilbur's work. Critic Stephen Stepanchev, writing in 1965, explores the poet's celebration of the "individual imagination, the power of mind that creates the world," seeing it as Wilbur's speculation on the nature of reality. Stepanchev also suggests that while this view of human as creator makes people appear "heroic," Wilbur has the twentieth-century writer's awareness of man's "roles as killer and victim." This tension, between ideal and actual, reality and dream, is very apparent in "Beowulf," as critic Donald Hill explains in his 1967 study of Wilbur.

In the years since the publication of *Ceremony and Other Poems,* American poetry has undergone radical changes. Many poets began writing in free verse, moving away from traditional forms. It became more common to write on personal and political subjects. Since Wilbur seemed somewhat apart from this movement, few extended critical commentaries have been written on his work of late. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, Wendy Salinger, Bruce Michelson, and Rodney Edgecombe have reexamined Wilbur's poetry, finding it more relevant to the turbulence of the times than earlier reviewers had realized. Michelson called him a "serious artist for an anxious century," and claims his poetry "is many-faceted, personal, and intense in ways that have not been recognized." As Deutsch comments, Wilbur's apparent sunny view of the world has subtly realized shadows.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Mowery has a Ph.D. in literature and composition from Southern Illinois University. He has written many essays for Gale. In the following essay, he examines imagery and Wilbur's use of Old English poetic techniques in the poem "Beowulf."

In his poem "Ars poetica," Archibald MacLeish said that "a poem should not mean but be." Richard Wilbur believes that a poem is not a vehicle for communicating a message but that it is an object with "its own life" and "individual identity." Wilbur's poetry is often intellectually taxing, and he expects the reader to be involved in the poem, its imagery and substance. He does not intend to communicate a message, but rather to create an interesting piece of writing. He believes that art ought to "spring from the imagination" and create a "condition of spontaneous psychic unity." That unity depends on the relationship of the inner parts of the poem, one to the other, and the involvement of the reader in the poem itself. He expects the reader to engage his or her intellect to understand and enjoy his poetry. As a result, a balance between the intellect and the imagination will be achieved, as in his poem "Beowulf."

Wilbur's way of maintaining the reader's involvement in the poem is by creating intense images out of routine images. For example, in the second line of "Beowulf," the routine images of flowers and grass are intensified by association with incongruous words. The flowers are "attentive"; the grass is "garrulous green." By personifying (giving human traits to a non-human object) these plants, he has created more intense images of flowers standing tall, seemingly listening for some sound, and then the talkative green grass supplying that sound. Additionally, the combination of these two new images creates one of a meadow (the scenery) with all its parts interacting with each other, fulfilling the image of the first line "overmuch like scenery." Here is a place of more than just vegetation in a landscape.

The lark image in the first stanza is only a reflection in the lake. The lake retains the reflection of the lark as though it were a tangible object that could be held and released at will. At the second lark image, the lake now gives up the reflection. But the lark's call goes unheard, the flowers are "wrong," the day was "swiftly old," and "the night put out no smiles." These now create an atmosphere of desolation and emptiness. The contrast between these two scenes is important: the first with its hopefulness and the second with its silence and foreboding.

This approach is like that of the imagist poets: Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and others. These poets reduced the number of words in their poems to a minimum and intensified the meanings by artful juxtaposition. An important aspect of the imagist approach to poetry is the creation of a concrete image that "presents an intellectual and emotional complex at one moment in time," according to the editors of Modernism in Literature. An example of this is Ezra Pound's poem "In the Station of the Metro." The entire poem reads:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet black bough.

The immediate imagery is straightforward, but after a moment of reflection, these images combine in the mind of the reader to create a more intense one of people crowded into the subway station melding with the image of petals on a wet tree branch. The final purpose of the poem is the amalgamation of the two disparate images into one. Though Wilbur's poem is not an imagist poem, there are many similar aspects present in it.

Admittedly, some of the poetry of the imagists is difficult to fathom, but this is not the case with Wilbur's work. He does not give up the basic notion that poetry should be intellectually taxing, but he also feels that it should not be obscure. In the specific case of this poem, apparent obscurity may be the result of unfamiliarity with the original *Beowulf,* but such knowledge is not required to appreciate the story Wilbur is telling. It is his task to retell the tale in his own manner with enough detail to make it a complete story. It must conform to Wilbur's belief that a poem should be an "individual entity," even though it is far shorter than the original epic. Additionally, for the poem to succeed it must engage "the strict attention of the serious reader" say the editors of *American Tradition in Literature.*

Wilbur believed that the "strictness of form" in a poem is its strength and its advantage. He said that the "strength of the genie comes of his being confined in a bottle." As a result, what seems like a constriction becomes a strength. For this poem, he has selected the formal structure of seven six-line stanzas divided into two parts of four and three stanzas each. It uses the unique rhyme scheme: *ab-bcac.* The original *Beowulf is* a long poem (at least 3,182 lines exist and many more were likely lost over time) and for Wilbur to retell it might have taken many more stanzas. But he chose to limit it to just seven, requiring him to condense every part of the tale to fit his poetic form. The process of reduction and condensing, in combination with (what the editors of the *Anthology of American Literature* call) "the freshness of his imagery," created the intensely brief poem.

Beowulf is found in only one manuscript, which was probably written down in the tenth century. It is one of the best examples of Old English poetry extant. (Old English, the linguistic forebear of modern English, is derived from older forms of German and northern European languages from the middle of the first millennium.) These kinds of poems were recited or sung in public by a poet, called a scop. Many were tales of gallantry in battles *(The Battle of Maldon),* the lives of kings, religious poems *(The Dream of the Rood),* and tales of mythical beings. *Beowulf* is a combination of both historical kings and the mythical beasts that Beowulf fought to save the kings from annihilation.

Wilbur, a scholar of the ancient poets, adopted two important Old English poetic techniques for his poem of 1950. These are: the scansion or line structure of the poem and the alliterative nature of the poems. The scansion (metrical analysis) of the Old English poems consists of a two-part line, with each part having at least two stressed syllables. This can be seen in the following example from the epic *Beowulf.* The first lines (in Old English) are:

Hwaet, wegardena in geardagum, theodcyninga thrym gefrunon.

The metrical notation for these lines is:

The important aspects to note are the break in the middle of each line, called *ceasura,* and the two stressed syllables in each half line.

The poems of the time did not use rhyming sounds at the ends of lines. Instead, the Old English poems used alliteration (the repetition of consonant sounds) within the lines as the unifying "rhyming" formula. In the first line, the important sound is "g"; in the second line, the important sound is "th" (which is the "th" sound in Modern English). In both cases, this sound occurs at least once in each half line. A more striking use of this alliterative scheme occurs in line four of *Beowulf,* in which case the repeated sound is "s."

Oft Scyld Scefing sceathena threatum.

The use of alliteration by more modern poets is not a new occurrence. One of the most beautifully alliterative lines in American poetry comes at the end of the first stanza of the poem "To Helen" by Edgar Allan Poe:

The weary, way-worn wanderer bore To his own native shore.

The special beauty of this line is that it combines both alliteration (the letter "w") and assonance (the repetition of a vowel sound, in this case the letter "o").

Wilbur's poetic vision for his poem did not stop at the modern schemes available to him. He has used these Old English techniques, adding their ancient strengths to his own poetic creativeness to write this poem. Each line is readily divisible into two parts, and each of those parts contains two stressed syllables. Additionally, most of the half lines have an alliterative relationship with the other half line. In some there are two sounds repeated, as in line one of stanza two:

"Also the people were strange, were strangely warm." The repeated letters are "s" and "w."

The final measure of the success of a poem, according to Wilbur, is its sound. Just as the epic *Beowulf* was meant for public recitation, so too is the poem "Beowulf" intended to be read aloud. His "concern for structure coincides with his evident response to sensory impressions," according to the editors *of American Tradition in Literature.* He intended for the meaning of the poem to be carried "by the sound," as the reader is able to add dramatic emphasis to the poem. To feel the full beauty of the example by Poe, it must be spoken aloud. The process of saying these words will give the speaker an added enjoyment, too. For the listener to an Old English poem, the sound creates the atmosphere of the ancient scop. Wilbur's combination of the old alliteration and the new rhyme scheme creates a special set of sounds capturing the atmosphere of the old poem and pattern of the modern poem. As a result, the aural experience adds to the understanding of the poem.

Richard Wilbur said, "I like it when the ideas of a poem seem to be necessary aspects of the things or actions which it presents." For him, a poem is not just a series of techniques and words that create clever imagery. It is a total experience that combines all aspects of the poem into one moment. He once said that a poem is an effort to express knowledge and to discover patterns in the world. By reversing this process and joining two established patterns, not only has he created a new one, but he has found a new way to stretch the imagination and intellectual engagement of his readers.

Source: Carl Mowery, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Tyrus Miller is an assistant professor of comparative literature and English at Yale University, where he teaches twentieth-century literature and visual culture. His book Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars *is forthcoming. In the following essay, Miller examines how Wilbur echoes the strangeness and enigmatic nature of his poem's predecessor.*

Richard Wilbur's "Beowulf" provides an ironically truncated and lyrically simplified version of the Old English epic poem of the same name, which may date from eighth-century England. The original Old English poem, one of the most extended and powerful works of Anglo-Saxon to have survived, has several unresolved puzzles about it that lend it an air of mystery and strangeness. Its archaic and poetically stylized language, its origin in oral tradition predating its transcription, the loss of parts of its manuscript to fire in the eighteenth century, the reference of the poem to a still earlier time than that of the poet, its complex set of peoples and tribes, its supernatural figures of monsters and dragons, and its peculiar mixture of pagan rituals and Christian beliefs all contribute to the foreign-ness of this major early work of the English poetic tradition. Wilbur, indeed, finds in the original *Beowulf* a paradoxical quality. It is monumental and inescapably present for the poet as part of his literary legacy, and yet it is something he can only feebly understand. It stands like a heap of stones on a hillside or the stone blocks carved with serpentine patterns that can be found in the English, Irish, and Scandinavian countryside: testimony to an archaic past to which the present is connected, yet a testimony spoken in a language nearly incomprehensible to modern eyes and ears.

n Wilbur's version of "Beowulf," the character of Beowulf is viewed as possessing some of the same qualities of strangeness that the poem *Beowulf* has in the English literary tradition. Wilbur alludes to the fact that the character Beowulf, as a warrior coming from the Geats, is a stranger to the people with whom the poem is primarily concerned, the Danes. Furthermore, he is also a foreigner to the Beowulf poet, who may have been from Mercia, in what is now the Midlands of England. Beowulf travels from abroad, coming unexpectedly to the Danes to fight the monster Grendel, who has invaded their lands and terrorized them, brutally killing off many of King Hrothgar's best warriors and weakening his kingdom. Beowulf succeeds in killing Grendel and the monster's vengeful mother as well. In later years, he kills a dragon and seizes its treasure for his people but is mortally wounded in the attempt. He is buried in a lavish funeral ceremony along with the treasure for which he died.

Wilbur emphasizes the inscrutable nature of Beowulf's motivations for taking on these deadly challenges. One day the stranger shows up from beyond the sea, boasting that he can kill the monster that no one has been able to touch for years. He performs the deed, gains the praise and glory of the Danes, and goes home. For Wilbur, this inscrutability of Beowulf as a character is matched by the enigma of the poem that bears his name. An Old English poem about ancient Germanic societies, it arrives in the English tradition like a stranger without a name. As modern readers, we know only

external details: those partial and fragmentary clues to its meaning given to us by archeological study, other poems in the Anglo-Saxon language, and the few elements of the archaic traditions passed down to later times. We are forced to strain our minds to imagine what it might mean. Like the Danes who have heard of the warrior but to whom the man Beowulf was and remained a stranger, we can only say that we know "of" and "about" the poem "Beowulf," but cannot say that we really know and understand it. In the end, our attempts to read and interpret "Beowulf" are akin to the funeral rituals of Beowulf's people after he has killed the dragon and been killed by it. Reading it, marking its place in the literary tradition, and writing poems based on it as Wilbur has done, one does honor to something that is nevertheless understood only to a limited extent.

Rather than representing the setting and story of "Beowulf" in a realistic mode, Wilbur underscores the artifice with which the poet crafted his tale by projecting a stiff and stylized aspect onto the scene itself: "The land was overmuch like scenery, / The flowers attentive, the grass too garrulous green; / In the lake like a dropped kerchief could be seen / The lark's reflection after the lark was gone." This landscape has been rendered artificially still, like a painting; even the reflection is not subject to change, but endures after the reflected object is gone. Similarly, the "road" in the fifth and sixth lines is hardly a real place where vehicles, animals, and people are moving. It is more like a glossy strip of paint receding into a painted backdrop: "The Roman road lay paved too shiningly / For a road so many men had traveled on." Similarly, in the next stanza, Wilbur self-consciously comments on a quality of the poetic language of the Old English epic: "And they said the same things again and again." Like the Greek classical poets coming out of an oral tradition, Anglo-Saxon poets depended on stock formula and epithets, generic scenes and ritual enumeration of genealogies and of objects, around which the poet would improvise and embroider new variations. As one of the oldest poems of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, *Beowulf* is strongly marked by the ritualized, formulaic nature of its poetic diction. It says "the same things again and again."

Moreover, it is characterized by another form of repetition typical of Anglo-Saxon poet, in its use of alliterations within the basic four-stress line. Usually, three out of four of the stressed words in a line would begin with the same consonant sound. Wilbur formally alludes to this metrical practice in such lines as the fourth, which alliterates the "g" sound ("The flowers attentive, the grass too garrulous green"); the thirteenth, with its repeated "c" ("It was a childish country; and a child"); the thirty-first, with its insistent "h" ("They gave him horse and harness, helmet and mail"); and the thirty-seventh, which introduces a variant with the hard "c" paired to two "k" sounds ("He died in his own country a kinless king"). In this way, he signals that his poem represents less a narration of a real scene than a revisiting of a fictional site made up of words: the foreign Anglo-Saxon words of the anonymous *Beowulf poet.*

Wilbur touches very cursorily on the most exciting plot event of the source poem, Beowulf s unarmed battle with and slaying of the bloody monster Grendel. Speaking of Grendel, he writes, "It was a childish country; and a child, / Grown monstrous, so besieged them in the night / That all their daytimes were a dream of fright / That it would come and own them to the bone." Wilbur treats the monster as if it were the anthropological equivalent of a childhood phobia, which in turn implies that the

triumphant hero Beowulf is likewise less a real person than an imaginative expedient invented by the collective mind to keep such fears at bay. "The hero," Wilbur continues, "to his battle reconciled, / Promised to meet that monster all alone." Through the fictive invention of their poets, who have imaginatively brought the heroic stranger to their shores to save them, the people can leave the task of fighting monsters to the hero himself, who will face Grendel alone. Wilbur thus suggests the ways in which the poet's inventions are necessary to the people, yet serve their purpose precisely insofar as they remain different from everyday life, insofar as they remain irreducibly strange to those for whom they render fictive aid.

The battle with Grendel is similarly distanced. The long and grim struggle of the hero with the monster, which ends with Beowulf's tearing off Grendel's arm at the shoulder and displaying it to the relieved Danes, is passed over in a single sentence, followed by a strange calm: "They heard the rafters rattle fit to fall, / The child departing with a broken groan, / And found their champion in a rest so deep / His head lay harder sealed than any stone." It is as if the mighty Beowulf, having fulfilled his sole task of banishing the childish fear that had been materialized as a monster, has become a mere statue of himself, "the hero" carved in granite.

The fifth stanza reprises the setting of the first, even repeating the opening line: "The land was overmuch like scenery." Yet if in the opening stanza, the landscape appeared artificially luminous and still, in this later stanza, the hero's victory over Grendel seems to have drained any life from the scene. "The lake gave up the lark, but now its song / Fell to no ear, the flowers too were wrong," Wilbur writes. "The day was fresh and pale and swiftly old /... / And the people were strange, the people strangely cold." Having performed his single task, the hero departs, loaded with the gifts granted a warrior and the glory of his deeds. But Wilbur suggests that the hero is doomed to the tragic repetition of his entry and departure as a stranger. He takes the spoils and sets sail, but as the last line of the sixth stanza reveals, he laments even in his triumph: "These things he stowed beneath his parting sail, / And wept that he could share them with no son."

The last stanza draws together the enigma of Beowulf as a hero and *Beowulf* as a paradoxical starting-point of the English poetic tradition. Having fought against the dragon and been mortally wounded in this last great deed, Wilbur writes, Beowulf "died in his own country a kinless king, / A name heavy with deeds." Yet even in death he has remained a stranger to his people, his tragic self-sacrifice and confrontation of threatening monsters being only partially comprehensible to those under his protection. Wilbur alludes in his last lines to the enigmatic ending of the Old English poem, in which the fallen Beowulf is buried with the dragon's treasure that he lost in life in capturing: "They buried him next the sea on a thrust of land: / Twelve men rode round his barrow all in a ring, / Singing of him what they could understand." The final line, which connects Beowulf's death to poetry and song, suggests that where the mystery of the hero Beowulf left off, the poem "Beowulf" began.

The Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf,* Wilbur is suggesting, pays homage to and immortalizes that limited fraction of the man that the community could understand, making more familiar what had been irreducibly strange and archaic about him. Wilbur's own poem entitled

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"Beowulf," however, stands in a similarly fragmentary, summary, and reductive relation to the mysteries of understanding posed by the long Anglo-Saxon poem. Condensing into forty-two lines the hundreds of lines of the original poem, Wilbur signals his own relation to this "stranger" of the tradition; within the restricted ambit of his ability to grasp Beowulf, he too is "singing of him." In a final irony, however, his last lines suggest that, despite all the centuries that have passed, he is entirely in tune with the tradition, even at its earliest moment. For far from revealing an original intimacy with its heroic center, Wilbur suggests, the Anglo-Saxon poem also communicates strangeness, distance, and failure to comprehend its hero. It is from this strangeness and failure that poetry takes its point of departure. Once again experiencing the impossibility of grasping "Beowulf," both the poetic hero and the enigmatic poem that bears his name, Wilbur affirms his repetition of the Anglo-Saxon's predicament as he makes anew the earlier poet's troubled "song."

Source: Tyrus Miller, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

A Conversation with Poet Laureate Richard Wilbur is an interview with the poet by Grace Cavalieri, the host of the national radio series "The Poet and the Poem." This videotape is available in libraries or from the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

The videotape *Richard Wilbur,* produced by Lannan Foundation in Los Angeles, CA, includes a reading by the poet at the University of Southern California in 1990, as well as an interview with Wilbur by poet David St. John.

A 1997 audio recording of "Beowulf," translated by Francis B. Gummere and narrated by George Guidall, is available from Recorded Books Productions in New York.

Topics for Further Study

Explore how the rhymed lines affect the feeling of the poem. Read "Beowulf" aloud and determine how the rhyme scheme helps to create a certain atmosphere in the poem. Describe the atmosphere and explain how the rhyme contributes to it.

Research the sixth century A.D. in Europe, the period of history in which Beowulf would have existed. How did people live? What weapons and methods were used in war? Why do you think this was a time of upheaval?

Beasts and monsters have appeared in legends and literature throughout human existence. Is there any scientific basis for the idea of a monster? Trace the sources of such creatures as trolls, ogres, and dragons and try to determine how these monsters originated.

Richard Wilbur wrote a short poem, retelling the epic of Beowulf from his own point of view. Choose a novel or movie that has made an impression on you. Write a poem in which you retell the story in your own way.

Compare and Contrast

Roman Empire fell, around 500 A.D., Germanic people of northern and central Europe moved south and west, creating new kingdoms. These migrating people included Germans, the Anglo-Saxons who settled in England, and Scandinavians, or residents of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. Since these Germanic groups were connected culturally, they held similar attitudes toward warfare and the ideal of the heroic figure. Thus Beowulf, although a Scandinavian hero, was recognized as heroic by the Anglo-Saxons as well. Based on historical persons who appear as characters in the epic poem, scholars have determined that the events took place in the sixth century A.D. While Beowulf himself is legendary, the world of warrior bands and small kingdoms throughout northern Europe that is the background of the poem is accurate.

What Do I Read Next?

Richard Wilbur has translated poems and plays from the French, Russian, Spanish, and Italian. His translations of Old English include parts of the epic *Beowulf.* One Russian poet whose work Wilbur has translated into English is Joseph Brodsky, and Brodsky, in turn, has translated Wilbur's work into Russian. These two poets are similar in their use of rhyme and meter - aspects of poetry that are difficult to translate. Wilbur's translation of Brodsky's "The Funeral of Bob" appears in both *New and Collected Poems* and Brodsky's *A Part of Speech.*

Robert Frost (1874 - 1963) was a major influence on Wilbur. Like Wilbur, Frost was from a New England family and drew inspiration from that area of the country. The poets share an attention to detail in nature and the use of formal rhyme and meter. Frost has many books; one to start wi th is his *Selected Poems.*

Another poet who has retold a well-known narrative in a shorter poem is Denise Levertov (1923-1998), whose "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" describes a scene from the ancient Greek myth. Orpheus played such enchanting music on his lyre that, according to the legend, trees pulled up their roots in order to follow him and listen. In this poem, one of the trees tells what happened. "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" appears in Levertov's *Relearning the Alphabet,* first published by New Directions in 1966.

Wilbur also wrote books for children, including *Opposites: Poems and Drawings,* which he illustrated himself. These riddle-like poems, based on a wordplay game he played with his children when they were young, are in the form of question and response, such as: "What's the opposite of two? A lonely me, a lonely you." Wilbur went on to write *More Opposites* and *Runaway Opposites,* which has collage illustrations by Henrik Drescher.

As a young man teaching at Harvard after World War II, Richard Wilbur knew many of the prominent poets of his generation. Among his contemporaries, Wilbur says it was Elizabeth Bishop who most influenced him - by teaching him "the joy of putting a poem together." The critic M. L. Rosenthal notes the shared qualities of Wilbur and Bishop, describing their poems as having "elegance, grace, precision, quiet intensity of phrasing." Bishop's poetry is widely anthologized, but all her work can be found in *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979.*

Further Study

Butts, William, ed., *Conversations with Richard Wilbur,*

University Press of Mississippi, 1990.

In these nineteen interviews and conversations with Richard Wilbur, ranging from 1962 to 1988, the reader has the opportunity to hear Wilbur's "disarmingly open" voice and his views on poetry. A chronology of the poet's life and Butts' introduction trace changes in Wilbur's poetry over his long career.

Edgecombe, Rodney Stenning, *A Reader's Guide to the Poetry of Richard Wilbur,* University of Alabama Press, 1995. This book is meant to be perused with a copy of Wilbur's *New and Collected Poems* at hand. Edgecombe discusses each poem in this collection, and gives his comments on Wilbur's recurring themes over his years of writing.

Heaney, Seamus, *Beowulf,* Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000. The Noble Laureate Seamus Heaney translates the original epic, using the four-stress line and heavy alliteration common to Anglo-Saxon poetry, in this Whitbread Prize-winning book. In *The New York Times Book Review,* James Shapiro writes that "generations of readers will be grateful" for Heaney's accomplishment in translating this poem.

Salinger, Wendy, ed., *Richard Wilbur's Creation,* University of Michigan Press, 1983.

Salinger explores the critical reaction to Wilbur's work throughout the changing literary views in the post-World War II years. While in the introduction Salinger makes clear her own bias in favor of Wilbur's genius, she provides a balanced selection of reviews and essays by critics, incorporating dissenting voices along with more sympathetic ones.

Wilbur, Richard, *New and Collected Poems,* Harcourt Brace

Jovanich, 1988.

This volume contains all seven of Wilbur's books of poetry published before 1988, including *Ceremony and Other Poems,* in which "Beowulf" first appeared. In addition, this book contains the text of the cantata "On Freedom's Ground," which Wilbur wrote in honor of the centennial of the Statue of Liberty and which was performed in New York City in 1986.

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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:

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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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