Bidwell Ghost Study Guide

Bidwell Ghost by Louise Erdrich

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Introduction

"Bidwell Ghost" is an example of Erdrich's use of myth or legend in her poetry, a practice which is a firmly rooted tradition in her Chippewa heritage. It's difficult to tell what "Bidwell Ghost" is a reference to□possibly a family name or the name of a small town in Minnesota, the state where Erdrich was raised. Included in the collection *Baptism of Desire* in 1989, this poem recounts the myth of an orchard haunted by a young girl's ghost. Presumably killed in a house fire twenty years earlier, she still waits at the edge of the road for passing cars; if you stop she'll climb in but "not say where she is going." By using vivid images throughout, Erdrich describes the burned trees waiting for someone to pick their fruit, as well as the girl's ghost waiting for anyone to pass by, in turn blurring the lines between the human and the natural, and the natural and the supernatural. The poem ends with a question, perhaps asking the reader to ponder the cycle of death and new life.

Author Biography

Erdrich was born Karen Louise Erdrich in Little Falls, Minnesota, in 1954, the eldest of seven children of German-born Ralph Erdrich and Rita Gourneau Erdrich, a Chippewa. Both parents worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Erdrich grew up in Wahpeton, North Dakota, near the Turtle Mountain Chippewa reservation, where her maternal grandparents lived. The story-telling traditions of her heritage stimulated her to write her own pieces, an activity encouraged by her parents. In 1972, Erdrich enrolled in Dartmouth College. There she met her future husband and literary collaborator, anthropologist Michael Dorris, who was the chair of the Native American Studies department. While in college, she worked at a wide variety of jobs, including beet weeder, psychiatric aide, lifeguard, waitress, poetry teacher at prisons, and construction flag-signaler. She also became an editor for the *Circle*, a Boston Indian Council newspaper. She enrolled in a graduate program at Johns Hopkins University in 1978, earning a master's degree the following year and then returning to Dartmouth as a writer-in-residence. During this period, Erdrich began collaborating with Dorris, and one of their stories,"The World's Greatest Fisherman," was awarded first prize in *Chicago* magazine's Nelson Algren Fiction Competition in 1982. Erdrich subsequently expanded this work into a novel, *Love Medicine*, which was published in 1984. That same year, she published *Jacklight*, her first collection of poems. In 1985, Erdrich received the National Book Critics Circle Award and numerous other prizes for *Love Medicine*. She has continued to write novels, short stories, and poems, publishing a second volume of verse, *Baptism of Desire*, in 1989.

Poem Text

Each night she waits by the road
in a thin white dress
embroidered with fire.

It has been twenty years
since her house surged and burst in the dark trees.
Still nobody goes there.

The heat charred the branches
of the apple trees,
but nothing can kill that wood.

She will climb into your car
but not say where she is going
and you shouldn't ask.

Nor should you try to comb the blackened nest of hair
or press the agates of tears
back into her eyes.

First the orchard bowed low and complained
of the unpicked fruit,
then the branches cracked apart and fell.

The windfalls sweetened to wine
beneath the ruined arms and snow.
Each spring now, in the grass, buds form on the tattered wood.

The child, the child, why is she so persistent
in her need? Is it so terrible
to be alone when the cold white blossoms
come to life and burn?

Plot Summary

Lines 1-3

Here the poet introduces the ghost, a girl, caught in a pattern of waiting, standing by the road "each night" in the same white dress. Using figurative language to describe the dress as "embroidered with fire," the poet suggests this is probably the same outfit the girl died in years ago.

Lines 4-6

These lines establish how long ago the fatal fire occurred, destroying the house in the orchard along with the girl, though there is no mention of her family. These lines also inform us that even after this long, the place is still abandoned; no one ever visits.

Lines 7-9

Here the poet describes the effects of the fire's heat on the surrounding orchard. The branches were burned, though the trees didn't die. Notice the similarity between the tree and the girl thus far in the poem: both show evidence of the fire, yet both still "survive," the trees still standing in the orchard, the ghost still haunting the road.

Lines 10-12

Note how the tone of the speaker's voice shifts here from third person description to second person direct address. But who is the "you" being spoken to? Since there's only one person□the girl□introduced in the poem, we might conclude that we, the readers, are being directly spoken to, are being given instructions. This personal and immediate connection with the reader might help create a spookier feeling, as if we let the ghost right into our own car. Once she's in the car with us, the ghost won't tell us where to drive, and the poet suggests we "shouldn't ask," perhaps for fear of what the answer might be.

Lines 13-15

In these lines, the poet continues offering instructions in the event we meet this ghost. Using a disturbing and vivid image, Erdrich suggests the girl's hair was burned in the fire, now resembling a "black nest." Note how this comparison reminds us again of the trees in the orchard, where a real bird's nest might be found. In line 14, the image implies the girl ghost is still crying after all these years, her tears like "agates," which are colorful layered stones found abundantly in Minnesota, where the poet grew up.

Lines 16-18

Here the poet returns us again to the orchard after the fire. In these lines, she personifies the orchard, giving it human qualities, suggesting the trees were unhappy because no one showed up anymore to pick the fruit from their branches. Then, as if because of the lack of attention, the burned branches "cracked apart and fell." Note, again, the similarities of emotion between the girl and the orchard, both lonely and waiting for someone to come back.

Lines 19-21

"Windfalls" are unpicked apples which fall to the ground near the end of the season, sometimes even at the slightest wind. At the literal level, these apples then begin to break down and ferment, much in the same way fermented grapes are used to make wine. The verb "sweetened" here might suggest something becoming better. Note here how the burned branches are now called "ruined arms," once again blending the line between the natural and human realms. On a figurative level, the images in this stanza□forgotten apples becoming wine, the snow giving way to spring, new buds growing from "tattered wood"□perhaps all point to a sense of renewal, a larger cycle of nature, life emerging from what has passed away.

Lines 22-25

In this last four-line stanza, after such a close description of the orchard, the speaker suddenly reminds us of the girl ghost again, asking us questions perhaps she has been unable to answer for herself. With the repetition of the phrase "the child, the child," the tone becomes suddenly insistent, echoing the persistence of the girl, who "in her need" waits every night for a car to jump into. It's in these questions that the emotion of the poem, the extreme sense of loneliness, seems to focus itself most explicitly, the poet wondering if it is "so terrible" for the ghost to still be alone season after season, even when the flowers bloom. In this final image, Erdrich describes the "cold white blossoms" of the apple trees in the spring, as they "come to life and burn," perhaps suggesting the bright flowers resemble tiny fires. Note, too, how this image ties together one of the poem's central themes: fire and rebirth, "life and burn." These last lines are phrased as questions, suggesting that the poet wonders if perhaps the ghost finds comfort in the new blossoms every season and the larger cycle of death and rebirth they represent. By ending the poem with these unanswered questions, the poet forces us to leave the poem without a set conclusion, instead asking each of us to think of our own answer.

Themes

Horror

Louise Erdrich's poem "Bidwell Ghost" is about a child who died in a fire twenty years earlier and who continues to show up as a ghost at the abandoned land where her home was. The poem uses many familiar elements that readers will associate with horror stories. The presence of the ghost is, of course, frequently used in horror stories, making use of the fact that no one knows what the afterlife might hold. In "Bidwell Ghost," Erdrich uses the idea of a ghost haunting its former earthly home in order to capture the longing that a ghost must feel to return to a place after death. Stories like this often concern a tragedy that occurred at some significant time in the past: in Erdrich's poem, the tragedy happened more than twenty years ago. Ghost stories often take place one, ten, or even a hundred years after the event they memorialize. Horror stories also frequently rely on the existence of a particular haunted location, such as the apple grove in "Bidwell Ghost," which marks the place of the girl's death. Erdrich reveals the symbolic significance of this haunted location by showing its parallel to the girl's tragic life, its fruit abandoned by society just as her spirit has been.

Erdrich even incorporates a particular familiar horror story into this poem. The tale of the girl who can be found out hitchhiking alone at night is one that is common throughout many communities and one that is well documented in books about contemporary myth and legend. Often the girl is said to be wearing a nightgown, as the Bidwell Ghost does, but she is also described as wearing a prom dress in versions of the story in which her death occurred on the day of the school dance. By using elements of familiar horror stories and basing her work on a particular myth, Erdrich makes readers feel that they have heard this story before. This allows her to expand beyond the familiar situation, which is often told just for shock value, and to explore the dead girl's feelings in depth.

Nature

The ghost is supernatural, meaning that she occurs outside of the laws of nature as people generally understand them, but she is described using imagery that is drawn from nature. Her nightgown is compared to fire in the first stanza, and her hair is compared to a bird's nest and her tears to beautiful stones in stanza 5. Overall, the poem centers on the unfulfilled, abandoned feeling that links the spirit of the dead girl with the abandoned apple orchard, where sweet fruit, like her youth, is left to rot. In particular, the phrase "nothing can kill that wood" in line 9 draws a direct connection between the trees and the ghost, which also cannot die.

The relationship between the natural and the supernatural is a timeless one in literature. Writers used it most often during the romantic period of the early-nineteenth century. Writers such as Washington Irving ("The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"), Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (*Frankenstein*), and Edgar Allan Poe wrote about issues of life

and death, knowledge and mystery, using natural symbolism to represent the things that were beyond human understanding. This trend has diminished some as the world has been paved over with human- made objects, from buildings and trees to reservoirs and engineered genes; still, there is an element to nature that makes it an obvious doorway for writers writing about the supernatural. Horror movies such as *The Blair Witch Project* often take place in the woods, where the rules of society do not apply, and the same can be said of this charred and abandoned apple orchard, where people do not go.

Loneliness and Isolation

The poem, like many ghost stories, holds back on giving the reason for the ghost's behavior until it has shown in detail just how she does behave, so that readers find their curiosity raised with every line until the explanation comes at the end. The last stanza reveals what is driving the ghost to stay on earth at the same time that it questions her for haunting the land as she does. Being alone is given as the ghost's motive, making her "so persistent in her need." It certainly makes sense that, in order to avoid loneliness, she would wait by the road and climb into cars and that she would cry for twenty years. Having died as a child, she would not have formed enough of a self-identity to feel comfortable without anyone else around. Since ghosts are considered to be unsettled spirits who lack fulfillment, it makes sense that, in the case of a dead child, she or he would desperately miss the presence of another person's company.

At the same time, though, the poem asks, "Is it so terrible to be alone?" From the speaker's adult perspective, the apple orchard seems a satisfying place to spend eternity, with the seasons changing, the flowers blossoming into life year after year in the spring. There is a hint here that the speaker of the poem actually envies the situation that the ghost finds so intolerable. The speaker sees tranquility where the ghost, a perpetual child, sees only loneliness.

Style

"Bidwell Ghost" is written in eight short free verse stanzas, each usually three lines long. Unlike traditional verse, where each line is determined by a set number of accents or metric feet, the line lengths in this poem vary widely, ranging anywhere from four to sixteen words each. In free verse, the form of the poem grows from the poem's changing moods and subject matter□in this case, the poet chooses short, individual stanzas to organize her images. Stanza, in Italian, literally means *room*, so it might be useful to think of reading this poem as walking through eight small rooms and seeing, smelling, hearing, and touching the images placed in each. Erdrich closes every stanza with a period, not letting any images flow into the next. These lines ending on a period are called end-stopped lines, unlike enjambed lines, which have no punctuation at the end and "run over" to the next line or stanza.

Historical Context

Louise Erdrich grew up in a small town in North Dakota, where her parents taught at a school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. "Bidwell Ghost" reflects both her Native American heritage, with its rich history of oral storytelling, and the contemporary American culture that surrounded her. Oral storytelling has always been an integral part of the culture of the North American tribes, in which stories have a spiritual and ceremonial function that they lack in Western literature. They are used to relate history, social lessons, religion, and a general understanding of the world from one generation to the next. The traditional stories often combine elements of nature with the behaviors of humans: for instance, many Native American myths incorporate some form of a "trickster" figure to show humans that the world is not always as simple as it might seem to the naked eye. The form the trickster takes varies from one Indian nation to the next. The trickster is a raven among Indians of the Northwest coast, a coyote in the Southwest region, a spider in the Plains states, and a rabbit in the Southeast. In the trickster stories, children are taught to see and understand the limitations of the physical world, as the trickster often relies on some unexpected element to ward off evil and save humanity or to take advantage of humanity's ignorance. For example, a trickster figure might cheat some humans out of their food in one story, but the same trickster might, in another story, save humanity from a natural disaster that is being initiated by a more powerful supernatural figure.

Trickster stories are by no means the only kind of stories among the indigenous peoples of this continent, but they offer a good example of the way that information has traditionally been conveyed through telling stories. Like the myths of other cultures, Native American myths do include gods that appear to humans in the forms of animals, but there are also stories about historical events, including personal family histories, that are passed along in spoken rather than written form.

For this poem, Erdrich has drawn on a familiar urban folk tale, one that has been in circulation in American society for at least a hundred years. Jan Harold Brunvand, a renowned sociologist, included several versions of the story that Erdrich tells in his 1981 study of urban legends called *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*. Brunvand notes that stories like this are modernized versions of the returning ghost tale that was popular at the end of the nineteenth century. The subsequent popularity of automobiles, he explains, added the element of the ghost getting into a car and riding along for a while and then disappearing from the car when the driver is distracted; usually, the driver finds out later that the place where the ghost disappeared was the place of its death. Brunvand's book, one of the first studies of contemporary urban legends to make it beyond the academic presses and onto best-seller lists, points out how such stories, distributed throughout the culture in the same way that the Native American traditional stories are, exist in different forms in different parts of the country. Different localities at different parts of the country are likely to have some form of the story that is at the heart of "Bidwell Ghost."

With the spread of the Internet in the 1990s, urban legends have a new way to travel. Stories are spread around in a matter of hours, not years. E-mail messages ask

receivers to spread to everyone on their address list the warnings about such fanciful stories as gang initiations that have potential members driving with their lights off, then killing motorists who flash their own headlights as a reminder; HIV-infected needles hidden in strategic places to pierce and infect unsuspecting victims; or valuable corporate secrets worth millions that are released by irate employees. In each case, the teller of the tale will insist it is true, usually adding that it happened to someone they know. Studying such stories, as with poetry and the oral tales of the Indians and the urban legends that came after them, helps sociologists understand the cultures from which they derive.

In modern Indian culture, this oral tradition has become mixed with the methods of communication that are made available by technology. Stories are transcribed and then printed, or they are posted on the Internet; they are recorded by native tellers and translated into other languages; they are interpreted into paintings, dance, and other forms. Contemporary American authors with Native American roots recognize the importance of "told" stories, and they use stylistic devices of the storytelling tradition in their works. In describing her view of writing, Erdrich said in an interview with *Writers Digest* that storytelling is of prime importance to her, that she is "hooked on narrative." She sees the importance of it in all cultures, not just the Native Americans. "Why is it that, as humans, we have to have narrative?" she mused in an interview with Michael Schumacher. "I don't know, but we do. I suppose it goes back to before the Bible; that storytelling cycle is in the traditions of *all* cultures."

Critical Overview

Several critics point out Erdrich's use of specific locations in her poetry as a means to discover a subject fully. Carolyne Wright, in her essay published in the *Northwest Review*, points out that Erdrich's "work is so clearly rooted in its setting and milieu as to enable her to achieve access to the invisible: the realm of myth, which must always be grounded in the actual and tangible." Literally a "ghost story," this specific description of location and movement toward the invisible realm of myth is evident in "Bidwell Ghost." Also apparent, according to other critics, is a sense of blending between the human and natural worlds. In a book review published in *Poetry*, Vernon Shetley terms this effect Erdrich's "landscape of human loneliness." Wright agrees, concluding that "Erdrich's poetry responds to this aim by finding in the patterns of the visible world of nature and the received legacy of family and tribal history a vast fund of material."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is a writer and a teacher at two colleges in Illinois. In this essay, he examines the harsh attitude taken by the speaker of Erdrich's poem and how its fractured time sequence helps readers understand this attitude.

Louise Erdrich's "Bidwell Ghost" is a strange and difficult poem that presents a sympathetic situation in the voice of a speaker who is not sympathetic. Readers are faced with two possible ways to read the poem, and the two conflict with one another. Everything about the poem's subject and structure evokes a sense of pity for the unhappy, powerless ghost, but in the end the poem questions whether that pity is really appropriate.

The poem is based on a story that almost everyone is bound to have heard at some time, about a girl who died long ago under tragic circumstances and who walks the earth, seeking the company of the living. At different times throughout history, she has been called by different names, localizing her, affixing her sad story to the location where it is being told at the time. The details may be different□ in some versions, she died in a car crash, in some she was murdered, and in some she took her own life□but the story always has her making contact with unsuspecting participants, in the way that the Bidwell Ghost, as Erdrich tells it, "will climb into your car."

If the poem were only about this strange event that is rumored to occur now and then, it would be just another ghost story, amusing enough to be told around Halloween time or to make a campfire even more unnerving. The fact of the ghost's existence, told with intricate details, is enough to justify this as a worthwhile piece to read. But the last stanza adds a new element to it: the personality of the poem's speaker. It forces readers to go back and reevaluate all that they have learned about the Bidwell Ghost in the three-line stanzas that come before.

The girl's fate is tied to that of the orchard, which has died twice, by fire first and then by neglect. Years after the fire, it is so healthy that the trees' branches, full of ripe fruit, break off and fall to the ground, wasted by people too superstitious to harvest this bounty. The ghost-child suffers the same way. First, there is her actual death, twenty years ago. More recently, she suffers the same neglect as the apple trees, with her existence ignored. People are advised not to speak to her or touch her (if they even need such advice). Readers who have heard ghost stories since childhood, as most in American culture have, know that the spirits of the dead are assumed to walk the earth because they have some unfinished business here. They might seek revenge, they might seek mercy, they might seek forgiveness for the sins of their lives, but they are always looking for some sort of fulfillment that will give them peace and let them go off to the spirit world the way most dead people do. It is quite clear that the Bidwell Ghost is unable to find peace because she suffers from loneliness.

The poem leads readers to understand just how awful it would be to be a perpetual child, forced to wander the earth alone, avoided by frightened people. Just as the

ghost's obsession with companionship with the living becomes clear, however, the poem's speaker draws away from the ghost, implying that she worries too much about loneliness. The question raised in the last three lines, "Is it so terrible?," is surprisingly harsh for several reasons. The question introduces a mocking tone that has not appeared anywhere else previously. Being alone is established as the ghost's fear, and the poem seems to respect this fear throughout the first seven stanzas, but the word "so" in "Is it so terrible?" implies that the speaker does not feel it is very terrible at all. This sarcastic use of "so" is typically used to show that the other person's concern is exaggerated, blown out of proportion. Furthermore, the circumstance that the poem's speaker questions actually *is* terrible. In the last two lines, there are unsettling images presented by the words "alone," "cold," and "burn." The confusing thing about this poem is that the same speaker who provides these obviously negative images is the person who is asking whether they are so bad after all.

The only way to pass over the feeling of misery that the loneliness causes this neglected child is to emphasize the splendor of the blossoms' new life. Fire, in this last stanza, has a mixed meaning: it is the source of the Bidwell Ghost's misery. But, the poem goes on to suggest that the scorched apple trees are getting beyond both their destruction by fire and their neglect by humans by growing a whole new orchard from the seeds of the fruit left to decay. Erdrich balances the horror of the past with some hope for the future, implying that the child could, like the orchard, grow into something much greater and stronger. If this is the point of taking the child's "need" so lightly in the final stanza, it is not as heartless as the words used to express it make it sound.

The missing element, which connects the speaker's somewhat cruel dismissal of the ghost's concerns and the sympathy that the poem itself grants her, is hidden somewhere within the poem's distorted presentation of time. It starts with the words "Each night," and as a result readers often are likely to focus their attention on the present tense and on the ongoing situation. In fact, there are four different time frames presented in the poem, which is actually quite a wide span to be compacted into a twenty-five-line piece. Arranging them in chronological order, starting with the farthest past, offers some insight into why this poem is able to capture complex emotions within its limited scope.

The first step in the Bidwell Ghost's development was the fire that killed her. The apple trees in the orchard were hardened and blackened, "charred," and "her house surged and burst." There is the implication that this was a violent night, even though the word "burst" does not seem intended to say that the house literally exploded. More likely, this graphic visual description might be seen as an overstatement, in order to link the house to the blossoms described in the final line as coming to life and "burning." There is no mention of how the fire started, or of others who may have lived there with the girl: these glaring omissions add to the poem's aura of mystery, as if twenty years ago was before records, before memory, in a time that is only knowable through legend.

The second area of time concerns the following twenty years. Instead of focusing on the ghost, part of her development is explained indirectly, in terms of how the apple orchard has evolved. The charred branches were replaced with new, live ones, which grew so

heavy with fruit that they were torn right off of the trees by their own fecundated weight. Fertilized by charred and fallen wood, new apple seeds have taken root and started a whole new, clean generation of blossoms. The poem does not describe how the Bidwell Ghost developed over the course of twenty years. The ghost has, in fact, not developed at all. Nature follows its course in the apple orchard, but the ghost's situation has not been affected by time, and as a result (or possibly, as a cause), humanity has feared the situation and has stayed away.

The third time frame is the present. It describes what the ghost does every night, wandering her familiar road, waiting for something that will fulfill her.

The fourth, only slightly different than the present tense, is the near future. She *will* get into your car, the poem explains, and it then goes on to tell readers what they should not do in response to her presence; they should not comb her hair or touch her tears, the way one might be tempted to do for a distraught child. Perhaps most importantly, and certainly most mysteriously, readers are told to not ask the Bidwell Ghost where she is going. This rule, like the others, is presented as absolute law but not explained. It may be that conversations with ghosts are forbidden, although there is no clue of who might make or enforce such a rule. What is more important than the fact that "you" are told to not talk to the ghost is the question itself: if the ghost were forced to think about where she is going, she might not carry out the same ghostly behavior night after night.

Arranging the facts of the case in chronological order puts the ghost's situation in a clearer, more direct light. Instead of seeing her as a victim of fate, she appears to be stuck in a rut, unwilling to grow and change in the same way that the trees in the devastated orchard, which suffered along with her, were able to go on. Her loneliness is fed by human superstition, which warns people not to touch her or speak to her, but then, the trees have been just as forsaken by society, and they have come out fine.

If the story this poem tells had been presented more directly, in clear chronological order, the speaker's tough attitude at the end would not seem so much a harsh insult to the ghost-child as it would seem a way of urging her to get on with her existence, to take it to another phase, to learn, as the trees have, how to thrive on loneliness. Such clarity might make the poem easier for readers, but it would not force them to experience the complexity of the issues involved. Louise Erdrich uses the frame of a familiar ghost story, but the true source material at the heart of this story is that of any little child who has fallen victim to tragedy. Almost anyone is inclined to feel sorry for such a helpless, suffering figure, and it is to this poem's credit that it uses this emotional situation, stretching it, looking at implications that go beyond human kindness to consider other ways to react to a child who cannot find peace.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "Bidwell Ghost," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Kryhoski is currently working as a freelance writer. In this essay, she considers Erdrich's work in relation to the author's Chippewa heritage.

Erdrich's "Bidwell Ghost" is a work shaped primarily by mythic folklore and spiritual beliefs, the rhythms of nature and the author's Chippewa ancestry. A consideration of the poem uncovers themes in keeping with universal folklore and Native American philosophy and tradition. The significance of the work is primarily rooted, however, within the belief system of the native people to whom the author herself is related. A sense of Chippewa spirituality creates a cadence or balanced, rhythmic flow within the narrative.

As the title "Bidwell Ghost" suggests, the poem is a ghost story with a rhythm and feel of a tale that will continue to be passed along orally. The reader is immediately captivated by a ghostly figure in the first stanza, a woman who "Each night . . . waits by the road in a thin white dress." In the next stanza, the legendary encounter with the supernatural, anticipated by the reader, is forewarned: "she will climb into your car / but not say where she is going." The poet also warns, "you shouldn't ask" of her destination. The mythic quality of this encounter creates an impression of a personal account related, thereby giving the poem an almost historical flavor.

In various interviews, Erdrich claims her creative inspirations stem from her native heritage. She often mentions that several members of her family are storytellers. She claims that her heavy and repeated exposure to a family tradition of storytelling shapes her ability as a writer. It is not surprising, then, that the mythic quality of this "ghost story" is in keeping with Erdrich's background and native heritage.

The creation imagery appearing within the text on several different levels supports the unifying thematic force of the poem. D'Arcy Rheault, Native American scholar, explains in his work "Anishinaabe Philosophy: An Introduction" the concept of creation in the Anishinaabe (Chippewa) culture as one of dependency for native peoples. Central to the concept of creation is the Earth Mother, to whom the Chippewa are physically and spiritually bound: "Without Mother Earth there would be no life and no reason to live," writes Rehault. Essentially, the quality of the Earth Mother dominating Chippewa philosophy is the Circle of Life. Rheault adds, "We are witnesses to the circularity of the seasons, of life and death and life again, to the cycles that drive our very existence." To the Chippewa, the Circle of Life, or Sacred Circle, is a cultural code that binds the people together because all have a place in creation and all are dictated by the cycles driving it.

"Bidwell Ghost" is filled with images of spring, renewal, and reproduction. These images, in turn, serve as a device to create a movement within the piece, a movement through seasonal cycles and transitions from one stage of womanhood to the next. A closer look at the work uncovers the interrelationship between the elements of the poem

itself and the mysterious woman moving through its cycles. The images of fertility, the topical seasonal changes, parallel the "seasons" or cycles of a woman's life.

One of the first, the most powerful, sensual, and perhaps violent images of the poem appears in the guise of the apple tree. Dr. Clarissa Estes, in her discussion of myth and tradition in *Women Who Run With the Wolves* expounds on the image of the psychic tree: "it grows, it lives, it is used up, it leaves its seeds for new, it loves us." In folklore, the tree is symbolic of the feminine nature. Erdrich's work relies heavily on the image of the psychic tree to create movement in the poem, movement set in motion by milestones in a woman's experience during a reproductive lifetime. In the second stanza of the poem, a house has "surged" and "burst" into flame, "charring" the branches of the surrounding apple trees. "Surged" can also be represented as a flow, pour, gush, stream, or flood, whereas "burst" is more aptly likened to eruption, rupture, or explosion. It is "her house" that has undergone such violent change, a change occurring "in the dark trees." If the house in this instance is her womb, then the imagery accompanying it takes on a much deeper significance. The surging and bursting of "her house" represent the onset of the female menstrual cycle. Looking ahead, similar imagery within the poem supports this notion of the transition from virginity to womanhood as the "cold white blossoms come to life and burn," with fruitfulness, as the "unpicked fruit" becomes burdensome, or barrenness in the tree's "charred branches."

Color imagery present within the poem also contributes to this cyclical movement - white, red, and black dominate the poem, be it the cold white blossoms blazing red fire or the darkness of agates. These color choices, appearing throughout the work, are identified with specific stages of womanhood, those of the virgin (white) maiden, motherhood (red), and the image of the crone, the elderly woman approaching death (black).

The spirit in white, or the white maiden appearing in the beginning of the poem, resembles this guide or helper of the mother/crone who appears later within the work. Folklore surrounding the spirit guide, according to Estes, characterizes her as a piece of old and precious shattered God, still invested in each human. In folklore, she is identified as the helper of the mother crone, or the Life/Death/Life Goddess. Her image, presented at the beginning of the poem, is one of youth, of freshness, as mirrored by the white dress and the ring of fire that passionately encircles it. But the figure present in the car paints a much different picture, that of a woman with an unkempt "blackened nest of hair." She fits the portrait of Mother/Crone. A mythological figure, she is a fertile image, she is the mother, a rich, moist, dark and inviting giver of life. The "blackened nest" of her hair, as it is described in the poem, could be likened to closely intertwined roots blackened with soil.

What is missing from this portrait of life is the image of womanhood. A succinct lack of harmony is also evident within the movement of the cycles - the ghostly figure in the poem experiences no summer, no state of motherhood, and this disjointedness has an unsettling effect on the mood of the overall work and creates a mood of hopelessness, of lost opportunity. Seasonally, the poem does not progress logically in accordance with natural law. Spring, fall, and winter cycle helplessly out of sync without the appearance

of summer, as are the seasons of a woman's life, heightening a mood of despair implicit within the text.

The description of the haunted figure of the woman is also fleshed out symbolically in natural terms: her emotions like "charred wood," her appearance, characterized by her "blackened nest of hair" or "agates of tears," ground the figure firmly on Earth. In addition to the creative imagery propelling the female spirit through the life cycle, the author employs duality in her use of images to further assert a strong relationship between the main character of the poem and the natural world swirling about her. Dual images include, but are not limited to, those of maiden and crone, of white blossoms and darkened wood, of virgin frailty and passionate anger. The dual images set up a natural harmony or balance within the overall work for the reader. This duality is a reflection of native world values, according to D'Arcy Rheault in "Anishinaabe Philosophy: An Introduction." Rheault claims the Anishinaabe (or Chippewa) view of creation to be "a movement in unity rather than a unity towards movement. Creation is harmony seen in duality."

Louise Erdrich's "Bidwell Ghost" captures all of the beauty and harmonious movement of a woman's reproductive journey. In this "Creation sequence," the author relies on the beliefs of her Chippewa ancestry to flesh out and give great spiritual depth to the poem and to the tragedy of lost opportunity that inspires it. As the poem progresses, the reader is left to contemplate a haunting female image and the mystery behind her silence, and perhaps also with a yearning to wriggle her toes in the warm, moist soil.

Source: Laura Kryhoski, Critical Essay on "Bidwell Ghost," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Ketteler has taught literature and composition. In this essay, she discusses the way the poem "Bidwell Ghost" is shaped and informed by Native American spirituality.

"Bidwell Ghost"by Louise Erdrich is, on one level, a ghost story. The poem tells the story of a young girl, killed twenty years ago in a house fire. Since her death, the girl haunts the road by the house, inviting herself into the cars and thoughts of passers-by. But the ghost-child is much more than an eerie presence on a lonely stretch of road.

Erdrich is a gifted storyteller, and both her novels and her poetry reflect her gift for language. She also has Native American heritage, which shapes and informs her writing in many ways. Knowing that Erdrich is Native American and writes about Native Americans can sharpen and enrich our reading of "Bidwell Ghost"—though it certainly does not box Erdrich into only one identity or meaning. We might, however, expect to find certain elements literary critics have highlighted in Native American poetry in Erdrich's poetry as well.

In the Native American tradition, storytelling is about community. Telling stories is a way of organizing culture. Richard Erdoes and Alphonso Ortiz, Native American scholars and authors of *American Indian Myths and Legends*, explain that stories and legends "are magic lenses through which we can glimpse social orders and daily life: how families were organized, how political structures operated, how men caught fish, how religious ceremonies felt to the people who took part, how power was divided between men and women." Erdrich is drawing upon this tradition of storytelling to communicate to her readers. The form she chooses—poetry—has many advantages. One might say that what separates a written poem from a story or novel is a certain economy of words and a heightened sense of language: in other words, every word counts and is used to create a certain mood or feeling. Norma C. Wilson, author of *The Nature of Native American Poetry*, comments: "Poetry allows a rhythmic and emotional expression closer than any other written genre to the songs and chants that are integral to oral tradition and ceremony."

In "Bidwell Ghost," the mood is eerie and wistful. Like any good ghost story, the poem has a communal feeling about it. The reader might imagine a group of friends seated around a campfire, retelling the story. And this is exactly the atmosphere Erdrich wants to create. Ghost stories are an integral part of many Native American cultures. Erdoes and Ortiz explain: "Ghost stories and tales of the dead are essential parts of almost every people's folklore and American Indians are no exception. The ghosts, here, however, are not necessarily always evil or threatening." It's important not to assume the ghost in this poem represents evil— ghosts can be symbolic of many things. As beings belonging to the supernatural world, ghosts have special powers, and their presence can often suggest a healing power, as will be discussed later in this essay.

The opening lines of the poem create a very forlorn mood; the place where the girl waits by the road is deserted and has been for some time: "It has been twenty years / since

her house surged and burst in the dark trees / Still nobody goes there." Her waiting is habitual; she returns night after night, as suggested by the first line: "Each night she waits by the road." The reader learns that the cause of the girl's death was a house fire. Erdrich uses vivid language to describe the event. The house "surge and burst"; "the heat charred the branches." There is a sense of violence and destruction, and while Erdrich does not describe the death of the young girl, the reader uses his/her imagination to fill in the unpleasant details. Her "thin white dress" is "embroidered with fire"—the girl is forever marked by the violence of the fire.

The next set of images describes the violence the natural world around the house suffered. "The heat charred the branches / of the apple tree"; "the Orchard bowed low and complained / of unpicked fruit, / then the branches cracked apart and fell." The tree branches have become "ruined arms." Erdrich personifies—or gives human characteristics to—the natural world. The orchard bows and complains and the limbs of the trees are described as "arms." Many poets use the technique of personification to achieve different effects. For Erdrich, it is about connecting to the natural world. "An understanding of the interrelatedness of humans and the rest of the natural world is pervasive both in traditional songs and chants and in contemporary Native poetry of the United States," explains Norma Wilson.

It is a seemingly barren world the ghost inhabits, yet she continues to appear every night, and the cycles of nature keep moving forward. Line 21 underscores this point: "Each spring now, in the grass, buds form on the tattered wood." Wood is referred to at another place in the poem as well; in line 9, the speaker states, "but nothing can kill that wood." As a natural element, wood is stronger than the eerie sense of destruction and desolation. It stands the test of time. Despite the tragedy of the event, time cannot be stopped. The natural world around the tragedy is trying to heal itself. Just as the "windfalls sweetened to wine / beneath the ruined arms and snow," the cycle of life continues.

One way to read the ghost, then, is as a healing force. She represents past tragedies and memories. The nature of a ghost is somewhat like the nature of memory—fleeting, haunting, seemingly from another dimension which a person generally has no control over. Memories grab us and take us along for a ride, similar to the way the ghost forces itself into the car of drivers passing by: "She will climb into your car / but not say where she is going / and you shouldn't ask." The message is that our memories will take us where we need to be, heal us in the way we need healing. Robin Riley Fast, literary critic and author of *The Heart as a Drum: Continuance and Resistance in American Indian Poetry*, speaks to the importance of memory: "All across Native America, dream, vision and myth are essential to spirituality, along with memories, which keeps them alive; they are thus essential to the ways of healing these poets offer."

But what healing is Erdrich addressing? The answer lies in many things, but mostly it is the healing of a culture and of a bloody history. Like the young girl whose life was tragically ended before it reached fulfillment, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries hundreds of Native American cultures were systematically destroyed through brutal fighting and scheming tactics on the part of the United States government. The

sadness and shame of this history is ever present, like the tears of the ghost. "Nor should you try to comb the blackened nest of hair / or press the agates of tears / back into her eyes." In other words, as a culture and a country, we cannot forget what happened or try to conceal it or make it go away. The history will live with us, but it does not determine the future. The natural world has suffered, like the branches that "cracked and fell apart," but it is not destroyed.

Erdrich ends "Bidwell Ghost" by asking a question: "The child, the child, why is she so persistent / in her need?" The repetition of "the child" suggests a sort of pleading or cooing tone. The speaker continues her questioning: "Is it so terrible / to be alone when the cold white blossoms / come to life and burn?" Here Erdrich is juxtaposing the sense of loneliness with the idea of resurrection. The "cold white blossoms" of the last stanza hearken back to the "thin white dress" mentioned in the first stanza. White is the color of purity, of hope, and of resurrection. Erdrich makes an allusion to the myth of the phoenix—the bird that rises from the ashes of its own destruction. Similarly, the blossoms seem to come to life as they burn. The "need" addressed in the beginning of the stanza refers to the ghost's need for companionship. She waits for drivers to pass by so she can climb into their car. Her loneliness stems not so much from the fact that she is a ghost—after all, the mythic world is full of such supernatural presences— but from the fact that she needs to tell her story. She needs to be mourned for, and to mourn with someone—someone still alive, someone who can still appreciate life. Her story will be dead, just like her physical body, if there is no one to pass it on. The speaker is asking a rhetorical question in the last stanza, asking if it is so terrible to be alone in our memories.

The answer depends upon one's cultural perspective. For a culture built upon collectivity, upon storytelling and collaborative thinking and effort, it is a terrible thing to not be able to share memories and history. Sharing is the backbone of native societies. To achieve a "resurrection," one must honor the memory. "Bidwell Ghost" is a poem about memory and about loneliness. It is a sad story of a terrible tragedy—on many levels. But the story doesn't end with the tragedy; instead it begins there, retelling the event, passing it on to future generations so that the memory may be preserved.

Source: Judi Ketteler, Critical Essay on "Bidwell Ghost," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

Caedmon Audio has a three-hour audio cassette of Erdrich's book *Tracks*, which features Louise Erdrich and her husband, Michael Dorris, describing the daily life of Native Americans of North Dakota during the nineteenth century and the clash of their native legends and beliefs with white culture. It was recorded in 1989, the year "Bidwell Ghost" was published.

An abridged version of Erdrich's most famous novel, *Love Medicine*, is read by Erdrich and Dorris on a two-cassette recording from Harper and Row, released in 1990.

Erdrich's short story "The Bingo Van" is read by Joe Spano on Volume Ten in the series of cassettes produced by Symphony Space called *Selected Shorts*. This volume was recorded in 1986.

Erdrich is one of several authors examined on the videocassette *Voices on the Water*, which is a documentary of the International Festival of Writers, originally released in 1988 under the title *Authors of the World* and re-released in 1993 by Chip Taylor Productions.

A video cassette entitled "Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris" features Erdrich and Dorris being interviewed by Paul Bailey in 1989. It is available from the Anthony Roland Collection of Films on Art of Northbrook, Illinois.

Erdrich and Dorris were interviewed by Bill Moyers for the Public Broadcasting System's series *A World of Ideas*. This interview is available on videocassette under the title "Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris: Searching for a Native American Identity" from Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 1988.

Topics for Further Study

Discuss the nature images□apple trees, nests, agates, snow, etc.□that are associated with the ghost. What relationship between natural and supernatural does this poem imply?

Choose a story that you have been told as "true" and research it on one of the Internet sites devoted to urban legends. Then write a poem about it.

Research some of the scientific processes described in this poem. How long, for instance, would it take apple trees that have been charred in a fire to grow enough to start bearing fruit again? What chemicals will apples decomposing on the ground turn into? What are the chances that new trees will grow and blossom from charred wood?

Write an explanation for why this poem changes at the end with four lines in the last stanza whereas all of the other stanzas had three.

Examine some ghost stories from Native American tribes of the American Midwest and identify particular elements that seem to be related to this poem.

Compare and Contrast

1989: The world economy is in recession with several countries suffering from huge, hyperinflation rates in the triple digits.

Today: The United States, as well as much of the world, has enjoyed a prolonged period of economic stability, mostly due to new technologies developed for and requiring computers.

1989: Many of the countries in eastern Europe and western Asia belong to the Union of Soviet Socialists Republic, or U.S.S.R., which was formed after the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Today: After the Soviet Union disbanded in 1991, some of its former member countries joined the Commonwealth of Independent States, but this group is not nearly the world class superpower that the U.S.S.R. was.

1989: Ghost stories, such as this one, traveled by word of mouth from one person to another.

Today: Stories travel the world within minutes via the Internet. There are also Web sites devoted to distinguishing urban legends from true, bizarre events.

What Do I Read Next?

Louise Erdrich is one of the writers featured in the anthology *Growing Up Native American*, a collection of works from noted Indian authors of the past two centuries writing about their childhoods. Some other authors included are Leslie Marmon Silko, Black Elk, Michael Dorris, and Linda Hogan. This anthology, edited by Patricia Reilly, was published in 1995.

Erdrich's short story "A Place of the True Cross" is included in the anthology *Ghost Writing: Haunted Tales by Contemporary Writers*, published in 2000 by Invisible Cities Press.

Louise Erdrich is not included in the short story collection *Ghosts of the Heartland: Haunting, Spine-Chilling Stories from the American Midwest*, but these stories come from the same geographic region where her works always take place. This 1990 anthology from Rutledge Hill Press was edited by Frank D. McSherry Jr., Charles G. Waugh, and Martin H. Greenberg.

One of the basic texts for studying contemporary American folklore is Jan Harold Brunvand's 1981 *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and their Meaning*. The title refers to a series of ghost stories similar to the one told in "Bidwell Ghost."

Karl Shapiro's poem "Auto Wreck" captures much of the same sense of numb wonder over the immutable forces of life and death, using a similar, detached tone. It can be found in Shapiro's *The Wild Card: Selected Poems, Early and Late* (1998) from University of Illinois Press.

Starting as a poet, Louise Erdrich later concentrated on writing fiction, for which she has received international recognition. Her five novels, interconnected by characters that appear in various books, take place on the Ojibwe reservation in North Dakota. They include *Tracks* (1988), *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), and *The Bingo Palace* (1994).

Much is made of Erdrich's background as an Ojibwe and its influence on her as a storyteller. The Minnesota Historical Society has recently published a collection called *Living Our Language: Ojibwe Tales and Oral Histories* (2001), translated by Anton Treuer.

One of the most serious and respected investigators of ghosts in the past half-century is Hans Holzer. Several of his writings were compiled into one volume in 1997 under the title *Ghosts: True Encounters with the World Beyond*.

Edgar Allan Poe wrote some of the greatest poetry ever written about ghosts. His poem "Lenore" and "To Helen," in particular, capture the eerie mood of Erdrich's poem. They

are all collected in *Edgar Allan Poe: Complete Poems*, reprinted in 2001 by Grammarcy Press.

Erdrich is often mentioned along with N. Scott Momaday because they are among the preeminent Native American authors writing today. In fact, they do share similar sensibilities, which can be observed by reading Momaday's 1969 novel, *House Made of Dawn*, about life on the Jimez Reservation in New Mexico.

Further Study

Beidler, Peter, and Gay Barton, *A Reader's Guide to The Novels of Louise Erdrich*, University of Missouri Press, 1999.

Fans of Erdrich's writing will find this comprehensive guide useful in untangling the rich complexity of the plots of her novels.

Bloom, Harold, ed., *Native American Woman Writers*, Chelsea House Publishers, 1998.

A section of this book contains a brief biography of Erdrich, followed by excerpts from critical essays about her works.

Smith, Jeanne Rosier, *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*, University of California Press, 1997.

There are other books that study the magical image of the trickster in Native American writing, but Smith uses a large section of her book to apply this concept to Erdrich's writing in particular.

Stookey, Lorena L., *Louise Erdrich: A Critical Companion*, Greenwood Press, 1999.

This book focuses on Erdrich's fiction, but the introductory material about her life and writing style illustrates her poetic style.

Van Dyke, Annette, "Of Vision Quests and Spirit Guardians: Female Power in the Novels of Louise Erdrich," in *The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich*, edited by Allan Chavkin, University of Alabama Press, 1999, pp. 130-43.

Though focused on Erdrich's novels, this essay can help readers gain insight into the significance of the ghost in "Bidwell Ghost" being a young girl; it examines attitudes prevalent throughout Erdrich's works.

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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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