Blackberrying Study Guide

Blackberrying by Sylvia Plath

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Introduction

According to Plath's husband, poet Ted Hughes, "Blackberrying" was written in 1960 after the couple's return to England and the birth of their daughter. It was not included in Plath's 1960 collection *Colossus*, however, but was first published in 1971, in the posthumous volume *Crossing the Water*. With its long narrative lines, "Blackberrying" takes the reader on a journey from an external experience to an internal one. Immersed in the details of her blackberry-picking expedition, the speaker leads readers to an understanding of certain fears and foreboding without ever having to spell it out. Plath uses language and imagery in a very controlled way, leading the reader to see that every word has a possible double meaning and every image may bring to mind something internal, some inner working of the speaker. Plath has often been categorized as being a "confessional" poet who deals with painful personal experiences in her poetry; however, it is not necessary to view the speaker of this poem as Plath herself, even though it uses the first person point of view.

Author Biography

Through her life and her poetry, Sylvia Plath has influenced the shape of American feminism as well as contemporary poetry. Critics and historians often describe her as a martyr who died young, a victim of her times as much as her brilliant yet troubled mind and her choice of men.

Born October 27, 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts, to Otto Emil, a German professor and entomologist, and Aurelia Schober, a teacher, Sylvia Plath led a relatively privileged childhood. Her father, the subject of one of her best known poems, "Daddy," died when she was just eight years old. The next year, Plath published her first poem in the *Boston Traveller*. This early achievement was an indicator of future success, as Plath garnered a number of awards for writing in the next two decades. In 1953, she won first prize from *Mademoiselle* magazine for her short story, "Sunday at the Mintons." Later that year, she made her first attempt at suicide. In 1955, at Mount Holyoke College, Plath received the Irene Glascock Poetry Prize, and in 1957, *Poetry* magazine awarded her the Bess Hopkin Award.

An accomplished poet still not halfway through her twenties, Plath was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to Cambridge University. It was here that she met Ted Hughes, a young British man carving out a reputation for himself as a poet of nature's violence. Plath married Hughes in 1956, and took her master's degree in literature from Cambridge the next year. Their marriage, recounted in biographies and in Plath's own letters and journals, was stormy and rife with jealousy and conflict. After a year teaching in the United States, Plath and Hughes returned to England to write full-time.

In 1960, she published her first collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, and in the next two years, bore Hughes two children, Frieda and Nicholas. After Hughes and Plath separated in 1962, the drive to self-destruction that had intermittently haunted her throughout her life intensified. On February 11, 1963, a month after her autobiographical novel of a nervous breakdown, *The Bell Jar*, was published, Plath stuffed the door and windows of her London apartment with towels, turned on the gas oven, and put her head inside.

In death, Plath's reputation grew. Biographies were published as well as volumes of her letters and journals. Posthumous collections include *Ariel* (1966), which contains many of her most anthologized poems; *Crossing the Water* (1971), which contains her poem, "Blackberrying"; and *Winter Trees* (1972). In 1982, Plath's *Collected Poems* received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

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Plot Summary

Lines 1-9

In this opening stanza, Plath's speaker introduces readers to the scene and the task at hand - picking blackberries in a woods near the sea. In the first line she strongly establishes the isolation of the setting, emphasizing that "nobody" is in the lane and repeating the word "nothing." Through the use of personification, Plath depicts the berries with human characteristics, as though "peopling" the scene with blackberries. They are associated with the speaker's thumb, they are likened to eyes, and they "squander" their juices. By accumulating these details, Plath prepares the reader for an unusual but intriguing bond between the blackberries and the speaker: they have a "blood sisterhood" and the berries "love" her. In this stanza Plath also introduces the image of a hook, in the curves of the blackberry "alley" or lane. She also introduces the image of the sea, although as of yet it remains unseen (it is "somewhere at the end" of the lane). In the course of the poem Plath will develop these images as the speaker is "hooked," drawn forward down the curving path to the mysterious (because unseen) and somewhat threatening sea.

Lines 10-18 I

n this stanza Plath expands the setting to include the sky and other living creatures - birds and flies. Choughs are dark birds, related to crows. They are presented here as vaguely ominous, suggestive of death. They are described as being "in black" rather than simply "black," as though they are dressed in black clothing, as if in mourning. They are compared to "bits of burnt paper," like ashes blown from a fire; and they caw in "protest" at some unnamed offense. Their noise seems to break the stillness of the scene - theirs is the "only voice." Significantly, the black coloring of the birds recalls the blackness of the berries - and anticipates the blackness of the flies in line 15. In that line the speaker says of a bush of over-ripe blackberries that "it is a bush of flies," suggesting both that the bush is filled with berries that look like flies and that the bush is literally covered in flies. Associations with death occur here too, as the blackberries are depicted as rotting and covered in flies. Plath, then, has established links between the blackberries, the choughs, and the flies through their black coloring and suggestions of death. Looking back, lines 7 and 8, in which the berries "bleed" on the speaker and establish a "sisterhood" with her, includes the speaker in this network of associations. The suggestion of death is given a positive aspect, however, with the reference to heaven in line 17. For the flies, at least, the field of blackberry bushes is heaven. The "honey-feast" (and, perhaps the "milkbottle" of line 9) is reminiscent of the labeling of paradise as "the land of milk and honey." Line 14, with its description of the "high, green meadows" that are "glowing as if lit from within," similarly evokes a beautiful, golden world. It is also worth noting that this world is a world of nature, away from people.

The sea is again mentioned in this stanza, but it remains mysterious and distant - so distant that the speaker doubts it will "appear at all." But the path again "hooks" the speaker, drawing her closer to the sea, away from the blackberries: "One more hook, and the berries and bushes end" (line 18).

Lines 19-27

This stanza establishes a series of contrasts between the fields of blackberry bushes and the seaside. Emerging from an idyllic world into a harsher reality, the speaker is buffeted by the wind blowing off the ocean. The wind "tunnels" at her, and "slaps" her face. The hills she is leaving behind are "sweet" (recalling the honey sweetness of the berries) and what lies ahead is salty (the sea). As if being herded (the "blackberry alley" has turned into a "sheep path"), she follows the trail between two hills. She's "hooked" again, and now she is standing on the northern face of the hills she has just left. Plath's choice of the word "face" to describe the side of the hill seems intended to connect it with the face of the speaker, which has just been slapped by the wind. The hills' northern face is orange rock - a rather startling contrast to the "green meadows" up on top of the hills. This suggests that the speaker too is changed, altered by the transition from hilltop to seaside. The rock face (and the speaker's face) looks out on "nothing, nothing but a great space." This repetition of the phrase "nothing, nothing" reminds the reader of its first occurrence in line 1, when it referred to the blackberry field. That first occurrence now seems ironic or paradoxical, because Plath has, through the careful use of detail in the course of the poem, made what was originally presented as empty seem very rich and full. This fullness is now contrasted with the desolate expanse of the sea. The "din" of the sea also contrasts with the comparative quiet on the hills, where the cawing of the choughs is "the only voice." The fact that the sound of the birds is described as a "voice" is also significant, for "voice" implies an articulate, sensible being (what the choughs "say" has meaning), whereas the sound of the sea is violent and inarticulate, the result of beating on senseless and unmanageable ("intractable") metal. It is perhaps particularly ironic that the inarticulate sea is associated with people - the "silversmiths" whose beating on metal creates a great noise. There are other subtle allusions in this stanza to the world of humans - the references to "laundry" (human clothing), "sheep" (domesticated animals), and "pewter" (a man-made metal) - perhaps suggesting that harshness and violence are associated with humans. In contrast, the heavenly world of the blackberry field has "nobody" (line 1) in it. The poem thus traces an interior journey within the speaker as well as the exterior journey down the path. The speaker travels from a peaceful world of "sisterhood" with nature, a world that contains suggestions of death, but which are connected with thoughts of heaven. She moves to a hard, unsettling world of violence and noise, a world of people.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The first stanza of "Blackberrying" begins by describing the setting as a deserted road near the sea. Only the speaker and the blackberries are present in the scene. The blackberries are on both sides of the road, but they are more concentrated on the right side. The speaker describes the rolling hills of blackberries. The blackberries are plump with their juices and they are as big as the author's thumb. The red juices are compared to blood. The red juices on the speaker's fingers can be compared to "blood sisters" who give their blood to each other out of love. The soft berries conform to the shape of the milk bottle she uses to collect them.

The second stanza leaves off where the first ended. There is a group of choughs flying above making an unpleasant noise. The birds, through their noise, are putting up an objection to something. The author is overcome with a sudden realization that she will not see the sea today. The choughs look like "bits of burnt paper" blowing in the sky and illuminating the bright green of the blackberry bushes. There is one bush so overfilled with blackberries that the author walks towards it. When standing next to the blackberry bush, the author notes that the bush is also filled with flies which are eating the ripe berries. The flies are full of pleasure from the blackberries. The author makes another turn down the road and suddenly the blackberry bushes are no more.

As the blackberry bushes have ended, the author is looking forward to the sea that she had thought was near, that was before the call of the choughs. The author is walking in between two hills that act as a wind tunnel blowing the air towards her. The author observes that there is no salt in the air, thus no sea. The author makes another turn and she is faced with the side of one of the hills which is made of an orange rock. The orange rock extends upward. The orange rock faces a great space twinkling with white and silver lights. She hears the sounds of metal on metal.

Analysis

The title of the poem "Blackberrying" by Sylvia Plath suggests to the reader that the subject matter will be blackberry picking.

"Blackberrying" is structured as a 27-line poem arranged in three stanzas. The poem is organized and told chronologically following the author's walk down the road.

"Blackberrying" uses expressive and colorful language to fully make use of the setting of the poem. The author mentions seven separate colors: red-blue, black, green, blue-green, orange, white and pewter. This allows the reader to paint a picture in his or her mind.

The genre of the poem is narrative as the author is explaining a scene and event. The author is the speaker of the poem and the only human character in the story. Since the reader knows the author to be Sylvia Plath, the poem is given a female voice. This changes the way the poem is read. For instance, when Ms. Plath is explaining the desolate road the reader can imagine a female figure walking down the road alone, surrounded only by blackberries. When the size of the blackberries is compared to her thumb-pad the reader can estimate their approximate size by imagining the thumb of a woman.

The author is the only human character in the poem. The main subject is a fruit, blackberries. The author gives the blackberries human characteristics so that she may interact with them. Thus, the blackberries become the character the author uses to convey the themes of life and death and the inevitability of death.

The dark, dense color of the blackberry is related to the eyes of a person--specifically, a person with "dumb eyes." This can be interpreted in several ways. It can be taken literally to say that the person and thus the blackberries are dumb, as in not smart. More plausible, however, is that the author is trying to conjure the image of people who do not see, not who is literally blind, rather those who do not choose to see. These are people that go through life, not bothering to think about the world around them, the plight of their fellow man, or complex issues such as life and death. To the author, these people are represented by the blackberries. The blackberries do not see what their future will be. They do not examine their place in the world. The blackberries do not know that one moment they will be plump and ripe on the vine, their flesh encasing the bright red juices which run like blood and the next moment they can be easily plucked. The blackberries in the milk bottle are dead.

The size of the blackberry is related to a person's thumb. As previously pointed out the reader imagines the thumb belonging to the author, a woman and the reader is able to imagine its approximate size.

The author likens the bright red juice inside the blackberry to the blood that every human has running through him or her. Blood is essential for human life and the juices are an essential element making up the blackberries. When humans are pierced, they bleed red blood and when the berries are plucked from their branches, handled and punctured they bleed the same color. Besides both being of the same color, blood and blackberry juices have the same textures, both are sticky substances and stain.

The author describes the letting of the blackberries' juices on her hands as like the ritual between blood sisters. This ritual involves two or more people purposely cutting their flesh until they bleed and then rubbing their wounds together, thus melding their blood. It is more commonly referred to by the name of "blood brothers." The ritual commemorates the sisterhood or brotherhood felt between two or more people and their desire to be one, thus the symbolic blending of their blood. By using this ritual to describe the blackberries' juices on her hands, the author is thoroughly showing her attempt to give the blackberries human qualities. By participating in the blood sisters

ritual the author is trying to convey that she and the blackberries know and understand each other. The two characters, author and blackberry, are very much alike.

For instance, the setting of the poem is a desolate country road near the sea. The only items of consequence along the road are the blackberry bushes. The author may be trying to show that she too feels alone. There is no one else near her, no one understands her and she feels as if she is standing on the edge of the world, represented by the sea.

The berries are plump, ripe for the picking. The author may be explaining her situation in life; perhaps she feels as if she is in the prime of her life, or more likely, feels as if she should be. Yet just as the perfect health of the blackberry is confirmed, it is quickly snatched from its bush and stuffed in a milk bottle. As the blackberry has been given human qualities, the plucking of the berry from its branch symbolizes its death. The space between life and death is very brief, almost unidentifiable. The author, unlike the blackberries, knows very well that her death could come at anytime.

The theme of life and death is present throughout the poem. In a very short poem, the author touches on the thin line separating life and death, the life cycle, the inevitability of death. At the beginning of the poem, the author expresses the abundance of life represented by the many blackberry bushes. The bushes are plentiful, healthy and ripe. As the blackberry is picked, it is killed. The berry is no longer living. At one moment, the berry was alive and an instant later, it is not. Thus is the case with humans. In an instant, a healthy, young person could be killed and her life would cease to exist. The author is expressing her belief that her life could end just as quickly.

The flies on one of the bushes are feeding off of the juicy blackberries. This act is symbolic of the relationship between organisms in nature. One animal feeds off another plant or animal. The end of one life represents the beginning or continuance of another. Everything in nature has a purpose.

The author is walking down a small road throughout the poem. Each turn is noted by the author, allowing the reader to imagine the road bending. The author makes at least three distinct turns as she is continues walking down the path towards her ultimate destination. The path represents life's path, its course. Each turn in the road is an important milestone in life, a point in which a person has to make a decision about their life. The path always moves forward, as life also moves forward. The author also has a clear destination which is the end of the path. The end of the path is representative of the end of life, death. At first, the author believes that the end of the path will be the sea. After the arrival of the choughs, she no longer believes that she will reach the sea by following her current path. The author's travel down the path, like life, is not predictable. There are events in one's life that change its future.

The arrival of the choughs, which are crow-like birds, casts an ominous feeling over the scene. While once the feeling may have been abundance of the berries and therefore the riches of life, it is now isolation, depression and nothingness. The reader is more

aware that the author is alone and then suddenly even the blackberry bushes cease to exist.

The author had hoped to find the sea at the end of her journey, yet she is confronted with a sharp, hard wall of rock and a wide expanse of nothingness, a void. This may symbolize a feeling she has towards her own life. There is nothing living, no place else to go.

Themes

Sublime

Plath's description of the blackberries and of the sea evokes a simultaneous sense of awe and reverence best characterized in the idea of the "sublime." The idea of the sublime was hotly debated in the eighteenth century and later appeared in the work of romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, whose writing is marked by speakers aware of their own smallness in relation to the grandeur and might of nature. The final image of "Blackberrying" adds terror to the sense of awe, as the speaker describes

a great space
Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths
Beating and beating at an intractable metal.

Consciousness

In packing her poem with images of life's abundance and death's inevitability, Plath points to the uniqueness and the "problem" of human existence: human beings are aware that they will die and there is nothing they can do to change that. Her numerous metaphors and similes for the fruit underscore her joy at life's abundance, and her personification of the berries shows her emotional attachment to the natural world. This personification occurs in the last two lines of the first stanza when, after the speaker's fingers are covered with juice, she says, "I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me; / They accommodate themselves to my milkbottle, flattening their sides." Her sense of death is embodied in the images of the "the choughs in black, cacophonous flocks," and "the hills' northern face . . . / That looks out on nothing."

Nature

Nature isn't always a pretty place where flowers bloom and cute animals frolic in the sun. It is governed by the cycle of life and death, and the fact that a part of nature must die for another part to live. "Blackberrying" de-romanticizes nature in the image of the "bush of berries so ripe it is a bush of flies, / Hanging their bluegreen bellies and their wing panes in a Chinese screen. " This image of nature cannibalizing itself brings to mind German philosopher, Freidrich Nietzsche's words, "All that is ripe wants to die."

Journey

The speaker's journey through the lane of berries is analogous to the human journey through life. Sometimes people feel hemmed in on all sides by life's pressures, just as Plath's speaker feels surrounded by berries. The "hooks" in the poem, on one level part of the literal shape of the alley, can be read as events that change the direction of one's

journey through life. Throughout the speaker's walk through the alley of berries, she encounters signsflies feeding on a bush berries, the "cacophonous flocks" of crowsfull of meaning that only she can understand but not necessarily communicate to others. This is similar to how many people experience incidents and events in their own lives, seeing signs in nature that are ominous yet impossible to decode.

Style

"Blackberrying" has no formal structure. It is a three-stanza poem, written in free verse. Each stanza has 9 lines of varying length, some quite long. These long lines give the poem a greater prose-like feel than some of Plath's other poems. The use of assonance and alliteration, or repetition of similar sounds, in this poem is subtler than in other poems by Plath, yet, it is unmistakably present in such passages as "Blackberries / Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes / Ebon in the hedges. . . ."

Historical Context

1960s

Plath wrote "Blackberrying" in the autumn of 1961, while living in Devon, England. The year before, she had published her first volume of poetry, *The Colossus*, which was generally well received, but not as favorably as her husband's, Ted Hughes's, second volume of verse, *Lupecal*, also published in 1960. In poetry, the late 1950s and early 1960s saw poets such as Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and others popularize what came to be known as confessional poetry. Writers of confessional poetry detail intimate facts about their experience, often addressing previously taboo subjects such as sexual practices, drug use, or the status of their mental health. In 1959, Lowell published *Life Studies*, inaugurating the boom in confessional verse. While living in Massachusetts in the mid-1950s and teaching at Smith College, Plath audited a poetry workshop led by Lowell. Sexton also attended this workshop, and she and Plath became friends. Confessional poetry was, in part, a response to the staid and formal verse of the 1950s. In her essay, "American Poetry in the 1960s," poet and critic Leslie Ullman writes of the confessional poets: "Most of these poets . . . shared a tragic inability to redeem the self, in their personal lives, from the courageous but overwhelmingly painful process of self-confrontation they enacted in their poetry." Many of these poets took their own lives, including Plath, Sexton, and Berryman.

1970s

"Blackberrying" wasn't published until 1971, when it was included in *Crossing the Water*. By this time, the mythology of Plath's life was firmly in place. She was brilliant and talented but faced many hardships due to the influence of two abusive men in her life, her father and her husband, and she continually struggled to free herself of them. Increased attention to Plath's life was partly a result of the increased politicization of feminism. In 1966, the National Organization for Women was formed, pledging "to bring women into the mainstream of American society." In 1970, the Labor Department issued affirmative action guidelines to contractors doing business with the government. These guidelines covered women and minorities. Women's demand for control of their reproductive processes resulted in the most liberal abortion law in the country in 1970 in New York, and just three years later, the Supreme Court issued its historic *Roe v. Wade* ruling, making it illegal for states to ban abortion during the first three months of pregnancy. Women made headway in conventionally male-dominated arenas as well. For example, following a ruling by the Justice Department of the State of Pennsylvania, they were licensed to box and wrestle in Pennsylvania. In 1971, Gloria Steinem launched the feminist *Ms.* magazine, whose editors shared tasks in a communal, cooperative fashion, as opposed to the more conventional and male-oriented way of delegating tasks through a hierarchy of power. Also, books such as Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) and Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectics of Sex: The Case*

for Feminist Revolution (1970), increased interest in women's issues and helped lead to the development of women's studies classes in universities across the country.

Critical Overview

Much has been written about the relationship of Plath's personal life and her work. Although her poems at first glance seem to be about impersonal subjects, they often seem to contain a personal connection. Indeed, critics often find it difficult to interpret Plath's poems without drawing conclusions based upon her suicide and earlier breakdown. One of her most ardent supporters, A. Alvarez, however, cautioned against placing too much emphasis on the autobiographical aspects of Plath's poetry. While he praised her exploration of the themes of death and suicide, he added that he "was *not* in any sense meaning to imply that breakdown or suicide is a validation of what I now call Extremist poetry. No amount of personal horror will make a good poet out of a bad one." In the case of Plath, he noted: "The very source of her creative energy was, it turned out, her self-destructiveness. But it was, precisely, a source of *living* energy, of her imaginative, creative power."

"Blackberrying" did not appear in print until long after Plath's death. In a 1985 retrospective survey of Plath's poetry, Stanley Plumly wrote enthusiastically, "'Blackberrying,' it seems to me, brings together the best vocal and most effective visual impulses in Plath's poetry. It gives the speaker her role without sacrificing the poem's purchase on the actual impinging natural world. It enlarges rather than reduces. Its ceremony comes from one of the poet's most disguised sources, the small moment, the domestic life."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

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Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition whose essays, poems, and stories regularly appear in journals and magazines. In this essay, Semansky considers the idea of persona in Plath's poem.

"Blackberrying" has drawn readers' attention because they cannot help but imagine the person behind the poem, the one speaking the words, giving the experience shape. The speaker, however, is different than the author, in that the speaker herself is a construction, a mask if you will, for the author's words. However, for writers such as Plath, whose personal life has garnered as much, if not more, attention than her writing, it is often impossible for readers to separate author and persona. Combining author and persona, however, makes the poem *more* meaningful than if it were read in some cultural vacuum. "Blackberrying" has gained in popularity among Plath's poems precisely because it meets readers' expectations of the kind of person Plath was represented as being in all of the public discourse about her: fierce, brilliant, troubled, and haunted by death. Reading the poem, we see Plath moving among the blackberry bushes, feel her shifts in consciousness and attention as each image is pegged.

By delaying the entry of the "I" until the eighth line of the poem, Plath has readers focus on the landscape rather than the speaker. She draws us in by starting off with more general description of her environment and then narrowing her aim, as if she is snapping photographs first from a distance and then from close up. Readers learn that the sea is "somewhere" at the end of the blackberry lane, but don't know when they will arrive at it. This "carrot and stick" approach creates a sense of anticipation and of claustrophobia in readers, which they, in turn, assign to the speaker.

When the speaker's focus shifts to what is literally at hand, she compares the blackberries first to the ball of her thumb and then to eyes, emphasizing the physicality of her experience. The gap between the observer and the observed is closing. The full-fledged identification of the speaker with the thing she sees occurs after the berries "squander" their "blue-red" juices on her fingers. Squandering something is akin to wasting it, and using this word to denote the berries' power to stain suggests the speaker does not feel worthy of the berries' juice. Her sense of unworthiness, however, turns to gratitude in the very next line, when she says: "I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me." This newfound communion with the berries is symbolic of the speaker's attitude towards nature in general. Critic Jon Rosenblatt, in *Sylvia Plath: Poet of Initiation*, puts it best, writing:

The poet seems to identify with the vulnerable, animate
form in the midst of a hostile nature. The berries
thus become internalized objects: they symbolize the
fate of human beings who are "eaten" by the universe,
a metaphor Plath employs time and again in
the late poetry. The speaker wishes to establish a very
special relation with the berries and with the landscape:

it is as if the natural scene had been transformed
into a human body and she were commenting
on that body's condition.

The speaker, having identified with the berries, now adopts a worried tone. She describes a flock of choughs (Old World crows) in ominous, almost apocalyptic terms, as, "Bits of burnt paper wheeling in a blown sky." Such imagery starkly contrasts with the lushness of the berries in the first stanza, and suggests that the speaker, landed, is potentially at risk, a victim in the making. She never states what the birds are "protesting" about, but the implication is that they are hungry.

Plath, a student of myth, steeps her poetry in such symbols. Historically, crows have been a harbinger of death, following Viking armies into battle expecting to feast on the dead. The Celts personified death in the female triplicity known as the Morrigan, or "the Queen of Shades." Consisting of three spirits, the Morrigan was often depicted as a large, black crow or raven, sweeping down to catch its prey. Plath's image carries these associations. It is after the crows' emergence that the speaker does "not think the sea will appear at all." Her increased anxiety leads her to read the environment as a landscape fraught with danger and signs of danger. For the first time, she sees the land outside the lane, describing it in preternatural (supernatural) terms: "The high, green meadows are glowing, as if lit from within." This luminosity, however, is a prelude to death, not life, as she next sees "one bush of berries so ripe it is a bush of flies." The speaker, now fully inhabiting the persona of victim, identifies with both berries and flies. The former, having fruited, are ready to die; the latter, doomed by nature to a short life, are quite possibly enjoying their last meal. By saying that the flies "believe in heaven," the speaker assigns them a human attribute. The image of the feasting flies and martyred berries, fittingly, closes the speaker's own journey through the lane, which has also been a symbolic journey through a landscape of her own fears.

The last stanza signals a tone of acceptance, as the speaker finally arrives at the sea, a symbol of life, chaos, and rebirth. Rather than observing and identifying with elements of nature, as she has done in the first two stanzas, the speaker now receives nature's force, as "a sudden wind funnels at . . . [her], / Slapping its phantom laundry in . . . [her] face." By comparing the wind hitting her to "phantom laundry," the speaker introduces a domestic image, and calls to mind readers' extra-literary knowledge of Plath's private life, which was riven by marital discord. This knowledge cannot but feed into their understanding of the speaker's persona. She is now pushed along the sheep path, prodded by unseen forces both inside and outside her, until she arrives at the "hills' northern face" that "looks out on nothing." This "nothing" suggests both death and the absence of meaning. Her literal journey through the blackberry lane, a figurative journey into herself and her place in nature, has come to an end. The last things she sees and hears are:

a great space
Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths
Beating and beating at an intractable metal.

Rosenblatt notes that, "Unlike the blackberries, which Plath converted into 'sisters,' the sea resists all comforting anthropomorphic interpretation." However, the sound *is* a human one, and made by those who labor. Regardless that the metal is "intractable," the sound is one that suggests the possibility, if not the probability, of change, even if that change comes at death. At the poem's end, readers are left with the image of a speaker who creates nature in her own image but who cannot sustain that image throughout her entire journey. When she loses her ability to see herself in nature, she turns toward the human world. If readers see the speaker in the image of the silversmith, they see someone who continues to figuratively "bang her head" against nature, willing it to change.

"Blackberrying" wasn't published until 1971, when it appeared in her collection, *Crossing the Water*. This is a full eight years after Plath committed suicide and the stories of her life and tragic death had worked their way into public consciousness. It is these stories that readers bring with them to her poem, and which help to fashion their image of the speaker behind it.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Blackberrying," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Mowery holds a Ph.D. from Southern Illinois University and has written extensively for The Gale Group. In this essay, Mowery examines color and sea imagery in Plath's poem.

The most important aspect of a poet's creative effort is the manipulation of language to create unique images. It is through the clever use of the words that the writer invites the reader to experience routine images in new ways. For Sylvia Plath, the value of imagery "is not its novelty but its accuracy," notes Alicia Ostriker. An image is anything in a poem that calls on the reader to respond using the senses. Images are the sensory content of a work and they may be literal or figurative. The words "red rose" call on the reader to "see" a rose; the rough texture of sandpaper asks the reader to "feel" the gritty surface of the paper; the aroma of a pot of baked beans evokes the "smell" of the beans. This, in the hands of good poets, is what makes poetry engaging.

Two prominent aspects of Plath's poetry are sea imagery and the colors used to intensify the imagery. Edward Lucie-Smith (writing in 1970) notes that her "obsession with the sea" runs throughout her major volumes of poetry, including *The Colossus* (1960), *Ariel* (1965), and *The Uncollected Poems* (1965). She "returns to it obsessively, again and again" and this becomes one of the most important images in all of her poetry, including the posthumous volume *Crossing the Water* (1971). Many critics report that the image of the sea is symbolic of a variety of objects or events, *i.e.*, death (drowning) or a life-giving and maternal medium. In Plath's poetry, "contrary to tradition, it is thought of as male," says Lucie-Smith. Here, the focus will be the literal imagery, not what the image represents.

E. D. Blodgett wrote that one purpose "of Plath's poetry is to use imagery . . . to make a savage appeal to the reader." Many of her poems that are filled with this kind of appeal include verbal and visual savagery. The poem "Full Fathom Five" (written in 1958) is an early example of Plath's use of threatening sea imagery. This poem, with the same title as a poem by Shakespeare from *The Tempest*, begins:

Old man, you surface seldom.
Then you come in with the tide's coming
When seas wash cold, foam-Capped.

From these seemingly benign opening lines the sea is then transformed into:

keeled ice-mountains
Of the north, to be steered clear
of, not fathomed.

In this poem, the poet takes the reader on a journey that leads away from a threatening sea. The reader is encouraged to avoid it rather than understand it.

Contrary imagery is found in other poems of Plath's that employ the sea as the chief image. In "Finisterre" (from September 1961), the opening image is "the sea exploding / With no bottom." But at the end of the poem, the image is transformed through the eyes of "Our Lady of the Shipwrecked" in this line: "She is in love with the beautiful formlessness of the sea." From an exploding image to the object of the Lady's love, Plath juxtaposes the threatening and beckoning nature of the sea. A brief reference to a comforting sea is found in "Morning Song" (February 1961) when a mother, listening for her child's cry, says "A far sea moves in my ear." In the motherly context of the poem, this is a positive sea image. These conflicts are part of the intrigue of the sea imagery in Plath's poetry.

The poem "Man in Black" (from 1959) begins with the "shove and suck of the gray sea," showing the sea as a hostile, threatening force. Later, "the wave unfists" against the headland in its relentless attack on the shore. Similarly in "Point Shirley" (1959) she writes:

The gritted wave leaps
The seawall and drops into a bier
Of quahog chips,
leaving a salty mash of ice.

In this poem, the sea not only attacks the seawall, it crosses it and attacks an area behind it.

"Suicide off Egg Rock" (1959) contains even more disturbing imagery with:

- that landscape
of imperfections his bowels were part of -
Rippled and pulsed in the glassy updraught.

In these lines, the corpse of a suicide victim has washed up onto the shore. The final line of the poem closes with "The forgetful surf creaming on those ledges." These are examples of Plath's imagery of the sea as a relentless force, one that is unaware of the damage it does to the shore and the breakwaters that have been built to hold it back. It is an impersonal force with a disregard for the people it encounters; even the suicide's body is "Abeached with the sea's garbage." In these three poems, the brutal nature of the images shows the sea as male.

"Blackberrying," written in September 1961, is what Douglas Dunn calls "a poem of menacing description" that uses "direct statements" - "Blackberries as big as the ball of my thumb" - to create "surprising" imagery in the poem. A striking combination of the critiques by Dunn and Blodgett comes at the end of "Blackberrying." After following the sheep path, the speaker and the reader are assaulted by the overpowering image of the vast and mysterious sea. This final impression from the poem combines the calls of the choughs (an Old World, crow-like black bird with a harsh, electronic- sounding call), the rush of the wind and the din of the sea itself into what Plath calls a "doom noise" in "Finisterre."

Plath draws the reader into the text through what Dunn has called her "improved sense of drama," especially in her volume *Crossing the Water* (1971). This is created by her use of the "direct statements" and a "freedom of movement" that avoids "the earlier clotted style" of poems from previous volumes. Compare the introduction of the hills in the following lines from "The Great Carbuncle" (1957) to a similar introduction in the last stanza of "Blackberrying":

We came over the moor-top
Through air streaming and green-lit,
Stone farms foundering in it,
Valleys of grass altering
In a light neither of dawn
Nor nightfall.

Note the more simply described hills in the last stanza of "Blackberrying" and the somewhat congested presentation in the earlier poem. (This comparison does not mean to imply that one poem is better than the other; it merely indicates the difference in style that Dunn points out.) In "Blackberrying," Plath adopts a sparseness of expression that focuses the reader's attention sharply on the imagery she presents. In this way, she adopts the motto of the Bauhaus architects that says "Less is More." (In architecture this was a movement away from a florid style to a more austere style.) This analysis applies especially to Plath's poetry from her later volumes.

Dunn also comments that the poems in *Crossing the Water*, including "Blackberrying," are filled with "unexpected imagery" of the kind now under discussion. A writer for the London *Times* has commented that the poems in this volume are compelling because they "map out a territory which is unique, harrowing, . . . and which breeds its own distinctive landscapes." The writer remarks that these poems create a world filled with "the shock of surprise" at the mutable nature of the images in them. In the present context, this means that the sea is both changeable (always in motion) and permanent (always present). Plath plays with these contradictions to increase the dramatic tension in "Blackberrying."

In "Blackberrying," the dramatic moment of meeting the sea is intensified by the hesitant way it has been introduced (by the poet) into the poem. At first it is at the end of the path, "heaving." Then the speaker, impatient at the length of time it takes to follow the path, says, "I do not think the sea will appear at all." Finally, the sea is confronted but it is "nothing but a great space." It is this combination of hesitation and anticipation that creates the reader's interest. But when the sea is met, it is not what is expected at the end of a walk spent picking blackberries. It is an empty hostile sea that Jon Rosenblatt calls a "powerful and gigantic nothingness." The hope of a comforting encounter is dashed just as the sea itself dashes repeatedly against the shore in the deafening din. The speaker and the reader are left on the shore facing the unrestrained savagery of this hostile sea.

Brita Lindberg-Seyersted claims that the speakers in many of Plath's poems are uneasy in the out-of-doors, exhibiting "feelings of estrangement and fear." In "Blackberrying,"

the impatient speaker seems to be in a hurry to get to the end of the journey without taking the time to enjoy the experience of the blackberry patch. Stanza three opens with "The only thing to come now is the sea." However, this seems a bit of wishful thinking because two hills and one more turn in the path remain in the walk to the sea.

Margaret Newlin says that it is "tempting to call Sylvia Plath a landscape poet." This comes from the fact that she often writes about outdoor locations near her home. Lindberg-Seyersted reports that when she lived in the United States, inspiration came from the New England coast. When she lived in England, scenes were often taken from Devon and London.

Plath's deliberate approach to poetry, especially the land and seascapes, gives her poetry crispness and clarity. Lindberg-Seyersted explains that "Plath's depictions of places and landscapes reveal her interest in pictorial art." It is readily seen in her use of color and color combinations that contribute to the development of crisply drawn outdoor scenes. Many of her best poems are "landscape word-paintings," according to Phoebe Pettingill. An example of this "word-painting" is found in these lines from "Blackberrying":

A last hook brings me
To the hills' northern face, and the face is orange
rock
That looks out on nothing.

This passage could have been inspired by a painting hanging in a museum. The *Seascape at Saintes-Maries* by Vincent van Gogh and *The Stormy Sea* by Gustav Corbet are both excellent examples of paintings that embody the same intense quality described in these poems by Plath.

Some of her poems take their names from paintings. For example, "Snakecharmer" (written in 1957) and "Yadwigha, on a Red Couch, Among Lilies" (from 1958) are both inspired by paintings by Henri Rousseau. At the end of the latter, Plath writes:

Rousseau confessed . . . that he put you on the
couch
To feed his eye with red: such red! under the
moon,
In the midst of all that green and those great lilies!

The colors in these excerpts function as intensifiers of the scene. The rock and the couch could exist in the poems without the stated color, but including unexpected or intense color descriptions adds to the drama of the passage. In "Blackberrying," the rock face is "orange," an unexpected color. In "Yadwigha," the couch is "such red" and it stands in direct contrast to the "great lilies" and "all that green." Just as a crafty painter would use unconventional colors or color contrasts, so too does Plath. Her use of green twice in "Blackberrying" pushes the reader to see this color in two different ways. The first is a green that is "lit from within" and the second describes the hills as "too green

and sweet." Moreover, Plath's attention to the pictorial details of her poetry yields, what Newlin has called, a "salt-aired painterly scene." In "Blackberrying," facing the funneling wind at the moment the sea is first seen is a particularly poignant "salt-aired" image.

The "savage appeal" that Blodgett notes builds continuously toward the closing line: "Of white and pewter lights, a din like silversmiths / Beating and beating at an intractable metal." Here the poet captures one final powerful image - a noisy, determined, overpowering, yet mysterious sea. To do this, she combines two descriptive sensory attributes, color and sound, into one concluding image. The progression of color from pure unaltered white, through the unrefined gray pewter to shiny silver is paralleled in the sounds of the poem, a movement from the raucous cawing of the choughs through the rushing wind to the din of the roaring sea. As these are combined, they drag the speaker and the reader through ever-intensifying levels of sight and sound.

Margaret Uroff has commented that as a result of Plath's attempts to write about landscapes realistically, she created "deceptive and encroaching" landscapes. The images in the poems herein discussed make Blodgett's "savage appeal" to the reader an unrelenting challenge to the senses and imagination. While the images themselves may not be literally savage, they grasp the reader on a primordial level.

This essay has focused on Plath's crafty use of color as an intensifying agent in image building and on literal sea images that are at once beckoning and threatening. In "Blackberrying," the pewter-colored sea is the most powerful and enduring image.

Source: Carl Mowery, Critical Essay on "Blackberrying," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

Harper Audio has released an audio cassette of Plath reading her own poems: *Sylvia Plath Reads*.

Poet's Audio Center sells an audio cassette of Plath reading fifteen poems, entitled *Sylvia Plath* (1962). They can be reached at P.O. Box 50145, Washington, DC 20091-0145.

Topics for Further Study

Describe an incident in your life when you became suddenly aware of your mortality. Did your behavior change as a result of this awareness? Report your findings to your class.

Interview your classmates, asking them what about the natural world most inspires them and why. Sort the responses into categories and present them to your class, then hold a class discussion about the significance of the findings.

Is knowing about the personal details of Sylvia Plath's life important for understanding this poem? Why or why not?

With four class members, compose a visual representation of "Blackberrying." One stipulation is that you cannot be literal; that is, you cannot draw a picture of a woman picking blackberries. Aim to represent the emotions and ideas in the poem, rather than the action. When you are finished, present the composition to the class and have them discuss its meaning.

Brainstorm a list of symbolic images for life and for death with your classmates, then compose a class poem using these images.

Spend some time looking at a blackberry bramble in your neighborhood, then write a thorough description of it, using as many metaphors or similes as you see fit. Compare your description with other classmates. How is it different, the same? What do you pay attention to that others do not?

Write a short one-act play dramatizing Plath's poem and perform it for your class. Feel free to include dialogue, speech, and action not included in the poem.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Confessional poetry is popularized as poets such as Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton write freely and openly about sex, drugs, and their various neuroses.

Today: Confessional poetry is a staple of poetry workshops and literary magazines and journals. Its prose cousin, the literary memoir, is also extremely popular.

1960s: The Women's Movement gathers steam as groups such as the National Organization for Women and the Women's Equity Action League are formed to pursue equal opportunity under the law for women.

Today: The Women's Movement has continued, shifting slightly to become a human rights movement in general, and has spread across national boundaries. In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, China, and brought women's rights groups from numerous countries together to craft strategy and share resources.

1960s: Approximately 4.5 people per 100,000 commit suicide annually in the United States.

Today: Approximately 6.5 people per 100,000 commit suicide annually in the United States.

1960s: After her suicide, Plath's husband, Ted Hughes, remains mostly silent about her life and their relationship.

Today: In 1998, Hughes breaks his silence about Plath, publishing *Birthday Letters*, a collection of poems detailing his response to her writing and death. Hughes dies of cancer months after its publication.

What Do I Read Next?

Ariel Ascending (1985), edited by Paul Alexander, collects essays about Sylvia Plath's writing, her life, and her reputation. This is a useful resource for those just beginning research on Plath.

Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, published a month before her suicide in 1963 and considered by many to be a fictionalized autobiography, tells the story of a woman's battle against depression and her emotional breakdown.

Plath's posthumous collection of poems entitled *Crossing the Water* contains her poem "Blackberrying."

Margaret Dickie Uroff's 1979 book entitled *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* is the first full-length assessment of the relationship between Plath and Hughes.

Further Study

Broe, Mary Lynn, *Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, University of Missouri Press, 1980.

Broe attempts to demythologize Plath in this study
of the themes and techniques in her poetry.

Davison, Peter, *The Fading Smile: Poets in Boston from Robert Lowell to Sylvia Plath*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

Davison recounts the Boston poetry world of the mid-
1950s in this memoir, describing the complex relationships
among poets such as Robert Lowell,
Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Richard Wilbur, and
W. S. Merwin.
Malcolm, Janet, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes*, Knopf, 1994.

Malcolm's controversial "biography" addresses how
Plath's reputation developed *after* she had died. Malcolm
examines the complex and complicated relationship
Plath's ex-husband, Ted Hughes, had with
Plath's estate, and the steps he took to protect his
own privacy.

Rosenblatt, Jon, *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*, University of North Carolina Press, 1979.

Arguing that criticism on Plath has been "tendentious
and extra literary," Rosenblatt reads Plath's poems
as enacting a private ritual process of death and rebirth.

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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

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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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