The Boy Study Guide

The Boy by Marilyn Hacker

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Marilyn Hacker's poem "The Boy" first appeared in the *Breadloaf Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* in 1999 and is the opening poem in her 2000 collection, *Squares and Courtyards*. Written in eight rhyming stanzas, the poem explores the roles of gender, race, and writing in shaping identity. Hacker is known for her new formalist meditations on history, womanhood, and the "stuff" of everyday life. This poem addresses all three. As the narrator imagines herself as a boy completing a school assignment, the poet muses on the boy's life, his way of looking at the world, his relationship to gender, and his own identity as a Jew. Part fantasy, part character study, "The Boy" investigates the fluidity of human identity, pokes at the boundaries that separate one person's life from another's, and interrogates the ways in which human beings are called on to be one thing or another.

Hacker wrote the poem in response to a book review by Robyn Selman in the *Village Voice* of poem collections by Rafael Campo and Rachel Weztsteon. In the review, Selman describes the position of the young male poet as someone who sits at a window and looks out at the world and the position of the young female poet as someone who examines the room in which she sits□the room of the self.

Author Biography

Editor, translator, and teacher, Marilyn Hacker is also one of the most sophisticated poets writing in America today. Known for the acuteness of her observations as well as her formal inventiveness, Hacker creates tight, elaborate poems that have the quality of sculpture. Hacker's poems stand out for their craft and intelligence.

Hacker was born November 27, 1942, to business consultant Albert Abraham Hacker and teacher Hilda Rosengarten Hacker, both Jewish immigrants. She grew up in the Bronx, graduating from the Bronx School of Science and enrolling in New York University at the age of fifteen. In 1961, she married novelist Samuel R. Delany. From 1969 to 1971, they edited *Quark: A Quarterly of Speculative Fiction*. This was the first of many editorial positions she would hold. Hacker graduated from New York University in 1964. In 1974, she and Delaney separated.

Hacker's first collection of poems, *Presentation Piece*, published in 1974, was a Lamont Poetry Selection and won the National Book Award in 1975. Critics lauded her deft handling of complicated subject matter and the original manner in which she interwove personal and political themes. With her next book, *Separations* (1976), Hacker established herself as a master of traditional forms, such as the sestina, villanelle, and pantoum, and as one of the best younger American poets alive. Living openly as a lesbian since the late 1970s, Hacker has also made her poetry the place in which she explores questions of identity, particularly how the self is fashioned through discourses of sexuality, gender, class, and ethnicity.

In addition to the National Book Award, Hacker has received a number of other awards for her poetry including a New York Poetry Center Discovery Award in 1973, the Jenny McKean Moore Fellowship, 1976-1977, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, 1980-1981, the National Endowment for the Arts, 1985, and the Ingram Merrill Foundation, 1985. She has also won a Lambda Literary Award and the Lenore Marshall Award from the *Nation* and the Academy of American Poets for *Winter Numbers* in 1995. In 1996, Hacker won The Poet's Prize for *Selected Poems*. Hacker has two books due to be published in 2003: *She Says*, a translated collection of Venus Khoury- Ghata's poems in a bilingual edition, and Hacker's own collection, *Desesperanto: Poems 1999-2002*. "The Boy" appears in Hacker's *Squares and Courtyards* (2000).

In addition to the praise she receives for her writing, Hacker is also highly respected for her work with literary magazines, having served as editor for *Little Magazine*, *13th Moon*, *Kenyon Review*, and a special issue of *Ploughshares*. Hacker has also directed the masters program in English Literature and creative writing at City College of New York.

Poem Text

Is it the boy in me who's looking out
the window, while someone across the street
mends a pillowcase, clouds shift, the gutter spout
pours rain, someone else lights a cigarette?

(Because he flinched, because he didn't whirl
around, face them, because he didn't hurl
the challenge back—*"Fascists?"*—not
"Faggots"—*"Swine!"*
 he briefly wonders—if he were a girl . . .)
He writes a line. He crosses out a line.

I'll never be man, but there's a boy
crossing out words: the rain, the linen-mender,
are all the homework he will do today.
The absence and the privilege of gender

confound in him, soprano, clumsy, frail.
Not neuter—neutral human, and unmarked,
the younger brother in the fairy tale
except, boys shouted *"Jew!"* across the park

at him when he was coming home from school.
The book that he just read, about the war,
the partisans, is less a terrible
and thrilling story, more a warning, more

a code, and he must puzzle out the code.
He has short hair, a red sweatshirt. They know
something about him—that he should be proud
of? That's shameful if its shows?

That got you killed in 1942.
In his story, do the partisans
have sons? Have grandparents? Is he a Jew
more than he is a boy, who'll be a man

someday? Someone who'll never be a man
looks out the window at the rain he thought
might stop. He reads the sentence he began.
He writes down something that he crosses out.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

In the first stanza of "The Boy," the narrator questions who it is looking out the window. "The boy in me" suggests another identity, or way of seeing, of which the narrator is becoming aware. The gender of the narrator is not clear at this point. What is clear is the assumption that one's gender influences the way that one sees the world, the things to which one pays attention.

Stanza 2

In this stanza, the narrator continues questioning the gender of the boy inside her, wondering if he would have responded differently to his taunters "if he were a girl." The last line alerts readers to the fact that the narrator is in the process of composing a piece of writing, possibly a school exercise on a fairy tale or book about World War II.

Stanza 3

The poem becomes more transparently selfreflexive in this stanza. That is, the boy mentioned in the opening stanza is now the one crossing out words in the second. The "homework" he is doing includes writing the words, "the rain, the linenmender," which refer to the images in the first stanza. The last sentence runs over into the next stanza and explicitly states what the previous stanzas have illustrated: the boy's dawning awareness of what it means to be a boy. "The absence . . . of gender" refers to the way that the young boy is not aware of himself as a boy, and "the privilege of gender" refers to the ways in which boys, as opposed to girls, often do not have to think of themselves *as* boys but are nonetheless socially rewarded for simply being male.

Stanza 4

The speaker continues attempting to describe the character of the boy inside her, who resembles someone on the edge of puberty. That he is "unmarked" does not mean that he is "neutered," or without sexuality, but rather that he feels himself in the moment sexually undefined, ungendered. He experiences a moment of self-awareness when the boys in the park taunt him, calling him "Jew!"

Stanza 5

In this stanza, the speaker describes the book the boy in her (who is making observations and writing a story) read about World War II. "Partisans" refer to the organized resistance to Nazi occupation. The speaker makes the point that the story of

the war contains a warning, but the nature of the warning is unclear. It is a "code" to the young boy, who is just learning what it means to be a boy and a Jew.

Stanza 6

This stanza describes the boy's appearance. "They" refers to the Nazis, and the "thing" they know is that the boy is Jewish.

Stanza 7

In asking if the partisans have sons or grandparents in "his story," the speaker is speculating about the story the boy (who is an alter ego of the speaker) is writing. The speaker wonders which identity, Jewish or male, is stronger.

Stanza 8

This stanza returns to the image of the boy looking out the window in the first stanza. The person "who'll never be a man" is the speaker speaking *as the poet* (i.e., Marilyn Hacker), referring to herself as a boy and in the third person. The boy's last act in the poem is crossing something out that he just wrote.

Summary

The Boy is a short poem, which addresses gender identity, puberty, persecution, and religious beliefs as experienced by the narrator who is assumed to be The Boy. As the poem begins, the boy looks out a window and wonders if it is really he who looks out as the rest of the world goes about its daily ritual of mundane activities, such as the mending of a pillowcase, the shifting clouds, or even the lighting of a cigarette.

The boy thinks about a painful experience with some other boys who had taunted him on the street and his inability or reluctance to return the verbal attacks. The boy wonders how the experience may have been different if he were a girl but soon returns to the paper he's working on, writes a line, and then crosses out a line.

As the boy's mindset turns more positive, he declares that he is the one crossing out the words and he will call an end to his homework. "The absence and privilege of gender," mark the boy as being on the precipice of puberty with its strong sexual and gender identity with the privilege that boys enjoy as being perceived as superior just by their gender in society.

This volatile identity state does have some demarcation when the boy is harassed for being Jewish by some other boys in a park. The boy has just read a book about the Jewish experience during the war and he is overwhelmed by the warnings it presents and the code of conduct which he must decipher.

The boy describes his self as shorthaired, wearing a red sweatshirt, and wondering if there is something in his demeanor that will give him away or will make him appear to be lacking some important characteristic. He wonders if there something about him that he shares with those who were gassed in the war in 1942. The boy wonders if the Nazis had no sympathy because they had no children or grandparents and could not relate to the horrors of what they were doing.

Finally the boy wonders if his characteristics make him more a Jew than he is a boy who will one day grow to be a man. The boy describes himself now as someone who will never be a man and who looks out at the rain that will not stop. The boy re-reads the sentence he has written and then crosses it out.

Analysis

The theme of emerging identity in adolescence is important in this poem as the boy muses over his internal and external characteristics. The typical angst surrounding puberty for boys is complicated by the boy's Jewish religion, which not only causes emotional distress today when taunted by other boys but by the agony of sorting through the atrocities against Jewish people during World War II. The boy alternately wonders if he would ever grow up to be the kind of man who could endure such horrors

and then muses about the motives and the lack of empathy of the Nazis who could inflict such atrocities.

In spite of all the heinous occurrences of the past the boy does have appreciation that at least he is a boy and therefore has at least one thing in his favor in society since males are given preferential treatment. At the end, though, the boy still wavers and has reached no conclusion. His state of mind remains volatile, evidenced by his writing a line and then immediately crossing it out. Although it could be perceived as a piece of work lacking hope, the author does provide a sense of redemption in that at least this boy has options and the freedom to ask the questions regarding his own youth and his eventual manhood a privilege so violently taken away from Jewish boys his own age not so long ago.

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Themes

Chaos and Order

Puberty is a chaotic time, full of powerful and new emotions, bodily changes, and self-reflection. "The Boy" describes someone in the midst of such changes, which include a budding awareness of the boy's sexuality and cultural identity. The boy, however, is also *in* someone else, who is similarly questioning *her* identity, testing the limits of her own self-reflection. The "twinning" of these two personas creates a challenging poem for readers, especially beginning poetry readers, to comprehend. One device that helps readers is the order of the poem□the regular meter and consistent rhyme scheme. The form of the poem helps shape and contain the whorl of changing pronouns, the movement between imagined selves, and offers readers a way to consider their own relationship to the outside world and to their own identities.

Writing

Hacker demonstrates the power of writing to do more than simply record the details of the physical world; she uses it as a tool to investigate the social construction of gender and ethnicity. Social constructionism is a school of thought that claims categories such as gender (masculine/feminine) and sexuality (hetero/homo) stem from cultural influences and not from essential features of a person's biology or psychology. By assuming the character of a young boy just coming into knowledge of what it means to be a boy and Jewish, Hacker also assumes how the boy sees and interprets his environment. She tempers her description of his appearance ("He has short hair, a red sweatshirt") with speculation about his history ("In his story, do the partisans / have sons? Have grandparents?"), underscoring his future as *possibility* rather than destiny. The shifting pronouns in the poem and the boy's constant revision of his writing highlight the speaker's identification with the boy's way of knowing and seeing and emphasizes the fluidity of gender roles. Social constructionism is heavily influenced by anthropological cultural relativism, and its roots can be found in the thinking of postmodernists such as Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault.

Gender

Hacker wrote her poem at the end of the twentieth century when human identity is a question to be explored rather than a problem to be solved. Traditional categories of identity such as race and gender are no longer as stable as they once appeared to be. In America, sex-change operations are increasingly common, more states recognize samesex unions, and scientists argue that at root there is no real distinction among the races. University programs in gender studies, which draw on feminist scholarship but also study masculinity in historically specific ways, are gaining in popularity, and many of the assumptions that people once had about the psychological and biological roots of

gender are being challenged and disproved. The boy in the speaker is both a product of the speaker's imagination and a reflection of a part of herself that she is exercising. The melding of the speaker's and the boy's identity in the last stanza illustrates the mysterious nature of gender.

Style

Rhyme

With the exception of the second stanza, "The Boy" is composed of quatrains rhyming ABAB written in iambic pentameter. The second stanza is rhymed AABAB. Some of the rhymes are "true" rhymes, meaning there is an identical sound of an accented vowel in two or more words (e.g., "gender / linen-mender"), and some of the rhymes are half-rhymes, meaning the consonants in the terminal syllables rhyme, as in "cigarette / street." Iambic pentameter quatrains rhyming ABAB are sometimes called "elegiac" quatrains, after Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." Writing in a traditional rhymed verse form is not common for contemporary American poets, the bulk of whom write in a conversational, free-verse style. Hacker is one of the very few living American poets who is noted for writing in traditional forms.

Characterization

Characterization refers to the ways in which poets and writers develop characters. Techniques include describing characters' physical appearance, the way they behave and talk, and how they think. Hacker creates the character of the boy largely through describing his thought processes and through melding those thought processes with those of the narrator. The physical description of the boy, "He has short hair, a red sweatshirt," is minimal but, along with the way he responds to others who taunt him and how he begins to ponder his own cultural and ethnic heritage, it contributes to creating an image of a boy just coming into knowledge about himself and his place in history and the world.

Historical Context

End of the Twentieth Century

Hacker wrote "The Boy" in the spring of 1999, when Israel and the Palestinian Authority were still engaged in the Oslo peace talks with the United States acting as facilitator. The talks ended in the summer of 2000 with the sides unable to agree on a framework for peace. In September, Knesset member and Likud party leader Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, home of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the third holiest site in Islam. Muslims believe Temple Mount is where the prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven. It is also a holy place for Jews, who believe it is where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Sharon's visit provoked massive protests by Palestinians, who considered Sharon's visit a desecration of the site. The ensuing violent demonstrations by Palestinians became known as the "al-Aqsa intifada." The uprising has developed into the worst period of violence in Israel's history, with the exception of periods of warfare with neighboring Arab countries. Hundreds of Palestinians and Israelis have been killed since 2000 in Palestinian suicide bombings, border clashes, and Israeli missile attacks on suspected terrorists. Four months after his visit, Sharon was elected Prime Minister, roundly defeating incumbent Ehud Barak.

Partly as a result of the media's coverage of Israel's policy towards Palestinians, anti-Semitic attitudes in the United States persist. Anti-Semitic incidents have increased in the United States in the last decade, as attacks against Jews and Jewish institutions were up 11 percent in the first five months of 2002, compared with the same period in 2001, according to a nationwide survey by the Anti- Defamation League, "Anti-Semitism in America 2002." The survey also found that 17 percent of Americans held "hardcore" anti-Semitic views. The findings indicate a reversal of a ten-year decline in anti-Semitism and raise concerns that "an undercurrent of Jewish hatred persists in America."

1942

Although "The Boy" has a contemporary setting, the speaker mentions 1942, when being a Jew in certain parts of Europe could get one killed. Although the Nazis had been deporting Jews from Germany and Bohemia since 1939, it was not until 1941 that they began building death camps, developing gassing techniques, and organizing the evacuation system that was to take European Jews to their deaths. Under the orders of Adolph Eichmann, Chief of the Jewish Office of the Gestapo charged with implementing the "Final Solution," hundreds of thousands of Jews from all over Europe were forcibly brought to camps in places such as Sobibor, a small town a few miles from Poland's eastern border. Between April 1942 and October 1943, approximately 250,000 Jews were gassed to death there. All told, more than six million Jews were slaughtered in Nazi death camps during World War II.

Critical Overview

Squares and Courtyards has garnered considerable praise in the short time that it has been in publication. Reviewing the collection for *The Progressive*, Matthew Rothschild writes, "Elegant in form, casual and observational in style, these poems wrap themselves around large themes: death, friendship, parents' and children, Nazism, sex, nature, empire." Although the poems address emotionally heavy subjects, they are not anchored there. "What is redemptive here," Rothschild says, "is Hacker's devotion to words, friends, food, and nature." Ray Olson is similarly admiring in his review for *Booklist*. Olson zeroes in on Hacker's concern with death in the poems, claiming that the collection "is a book of midlife" that midlife poetry readers will especially appreciate. Olson lauds Hacker's keen skills of observation, noting, "how she and her peers react to the crises death imposes on them." In her review for *Prairie Schooner*, Esther Cameron also notes the prevalence of death in Hacker's poems, writing, "[The] collection is written under the aspect of transiency." Cameron points out the intensely personal nature of the poems, how their subjects come straight from Hacker's own experience battling breast cancer, losing friends to AIDS, and remembering victims of the Holocaust. "The poet both fights and celebrates the flux, Cameron writes, "as if from a deep understanding that life and death cannot be separated."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Semansky's essays and reviews appear regularly in journals and newspapers. In this essay, Semansky considers ideas of identity in Hacker's poem.

Human beings are not "essentially" female or male in any kind of set manner. Rather they become aware of their gendered identity in specific situations, when they are called upon to behave or think in a particular way, or when certain words position them as male or female. Hacker's poem explores the territory of gender and self-recognition, as its narrator inhabits one gender, then another, in response to the words and worlds in which she finds herself.

It seems natural to categorize people according to their sex, and one commonly hears statements describing certain kinds of behavior as "male" or "female." Indeed, conventional feminism is rooted in the notion that all women share something that sets them apart from men. It is this "something" that sanctions much feminist political activity and helps to create the notion that gender is a fixed, rather than a constructed, category. In her essay, "Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism," theorist Elizabeth Grosz sums up this "something," which she calls essentialism, as follows:

> Essentialism . . . refers to the attribution of a fixed essence to women. . . . Essentialism entails the belief that those characteristics defined as women's essence are shared in common by all women at all times. . . . Essentialism thus refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions.

"The Boy" attempts to debunk the notion that human beings have an essentially masculine or feminine essence, by showing how the narrator changes in relation to the circumstances and discourses in which she finds herself. She not only responds to the world, but, as a writer, she is actively engaged in creating that world through her words and her imagination. She writes her poem "as if" a boy, living inside the head of a boy who, himself, is only intermittently aware of his "boyness." Gender, then, in Hacker's poem, is more an act of the imagination than it is a fixed point of identity waiting to be accessed.

The idea of gender as something that floats rather than something that is fixed is obvious in the first line of the poem, when the narrator asks, "Is it the boy in me who's looking out / the window . . . ?" If the boy is *in* the narrator, what does this say about the narrator's identity? It is unclear and that is the point. Certainty itself, in relation to human identity, is a fantasy, a vestige of a fading order that imposes categories on people to better understand and control them.

In the next stanza, the narrator continues with the process of self-interrogation, this time proposing a "what if" scenario for the "boy inside." What if, the boy thinks, he were a girl, because he did not have the guts to face his accusers who hurled epithets at him? This

kind of reasoning is based upon gender stereotypes: a real man would defend himself and challenge his accusers; only a "girl" would turn away from them. The boy is struggling not only to understand his own behavior but also to write, penning a line and then crossing it out. In the very next stanza, the poem moves out of the mental space of the boy and into that of the narrator.

Hacker's exploration of the space of gender takes place in her imagination and in her writing, which are indistinguishable. A writer's imagination is necessarily in her writing; where else could it be? That is why the "boy inside" the narrator is the persona the poet inhabits. This is where the poem becomes tricky. A persona is a kind of mask the writer uses to speak through. Say, for example, you put on a mask of George W. Bush and then give a speech to the American people about terrorism. You would be inhabiting (or trying to) his identity to do this; you would be speaking *as if* you were George Bush, using his intonations, vocabulary, describing the world the way you believe George Bush sees it, etc. In some ways, writers *always* use a persona, even when they are writing autobiographically.

"The Boy" resonates more loudly if readers also know that Hacker is both lesbian and Jewish, as these identities inflect the others she tries on in the course of the poem. In a panel discussion hosted by the Poetry Society of America and later transcribed as the online essay, "Poetry Criticism: Poetry and Politics," Hacker says this about other intersections in the poem:

> "The Boy" began as a mental conversation with a poet-critic friend, who, in an essay, posited the stance of the young woman poet as "examining the room she's sitting in" where the young male poet is looking out the window . . . The "boy in me" who was indeed looking out the window as he/I wrote, responded to her essay. But, although the questions of Jewish identity as inflecting masculinity become central to the poem, as the old saw goes, "I didn't know he was Jewish"□at least, not until I was well into writing it.

Hacker emphasizes the differences between how a male poet might look at the world and how a female poet might. Hacker's friend presents male poets as concerned with the world outside of them, the physical world. This is what the first stanza describes□ things seen from a window. In claiming that a young woman poet is prone to "examining the room she's sitting in," the friend suggests not only that women's attention is drawn to their immediate vicinity but also that they are more innerdirected, more apt to use their bodies and emotions, their images of themselves as subjects for their poems. The "room she's sitting in" is the room of the self. These are stereotypes, of course, of certain kinds of gendered thinking, but they are stereotypes that Hacker fruitfully explores to craft her poem. The poem is surprising because Hacker herself was surprised when writing it, as she notes above. This is a common occurrence for writers, as characters often take on a life of their own once put down on paper. In an email to

the author dated January 11, 2003, Hacker details how she came to the first images of the poem:

"The Boy" was written in my flat in . . . Paris, where
my worktable faces a window with a vis à vis, beyond
which the lives of the people living opposite,
framed by door-sized windows, go on more or less
before my eyes, as mine does before theirs. A schoolchild
doing homework in one of those flats would
face me as I'd face him or her. But there is no such
child; it was I who watched the elderly widow (I think
she's a widow) with the enormous rubber plant in her
front room sitting at the window hemming a pillowcase
that day, while her young neighbor-on-the-landing
leaned out the window with a lit cigarette,
watching the street.

Hacker's willingness to imagine herself as other than what she is demonstrates a quality of imagination rare in today's poets, who often become stuck on one way of seeing. At root, "The Boy" is as much about the relationship between personal risk and poetic capital as it is about the slippery ground of subjectivity. In fashioning a poem that takes readers through the poet's process of self-discovery, Hacker shows how readers, as well as writers, participate in constructing (and reconstructing) conventions of personhood.

Personhood, memory, and the language of becoming are subjects Hacker frequently addresses in *Squares and Courtyards*, and the image of a child at the window contemplating the world appears again, in the last stanza of the title poem, this time as a young girl.

Not knowing what to thank or whom to bless,
the schoolgirl at the window, whom I'm not,
hums cadences it soothes her to repeat
which open into other languages
in which she'll piece together sentences
while I imagine her across the street.

Hacker is both the schoolboy and the schoolgirl, and is neither. Her capacity to write herself in and out of the world of others is her poetic gift, one she uses to share with readers the shape of her life, the shape of experience itself.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "The Boy," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Holm is a freelance writer with speculative fiction and nonfiction publications. In this essay, Holm notes the rich combination of narrative usage, allusion, word play, and mechanics that Hacker uses to drive home the subject matter of this poem.

Hacker, a lesbian, feminist, and Jewish poet, has no doubt experienced in her lifetime the ostracism that comes from being a minority or expressing a minority viewpoint on a number of fronts. In Hacker's powerful and heartrending poem "The Boy," the poet uses poetry-specific mechanics as well as narrative craft to hammer home the pain of being different and being apart from the majority. What is most amazing about this poem is the poet's ability to touch upon gender confusion, bigotry, racism, and anti-Semitism in such a small amount of space. The reader is hit with these issues on a number of simultaneous fronts.

To begin with, the identity and gender of the narrator in "The Boy" is murky, at best. Two different interpretations work in the poem's favor, even though the outcomes suggest slightly different issues. It does not matter. In both cases, the narrator is struggling with his or her sense of being different from the mainstream world and trying to nail down an identity.

The understood interpretation of the poem assumes a female narrator. If the reader decides that this is a poem about a lesbian woman, then it makes sense. But, the reader must work for this conclusion, amidst the confusion of the narrator and Hacker's clever mechanics. This is a poem that takes some thought to unravel.

The first stanza, then, might be interpreted as a lesbian narrator, acknowledging the "maleness" within herself. Even as early as this first line, one is given the sense of separateness and division. The male part of the narrator is "within" and "looking out."

Hacker further accentuates the narrator's separateness from the rest of the world in the first stanza. Across the street, others are engaging in innocuous, non-risky, everyday behaviors. Depending on how deeply one searches for subtleties in this poem, the word "shift" might also be seen as significant. This narrator seems to be walking a shifting line of gender identity, as a woman with the essence of a boy inside of her. The entire first stanza ends with a question mark, making the narrator's shifting gender identity much more interesting than if she had started out by saying "It is the boy in me." What part of this character is looking out the window, the male or the female essence?

The second stanza completely turns the tables. Here, the narrator refers to herself as the boy and actually recalls a painful incident of discrimination. Perhaps the most intriguing line in this stanza is the fourth line: "he briefly wonders□if he were a girl." The confusion of the narrator has been expressed. She refers to herself as "he" and wonders, "if he were a girl." If the boy were a girl, would the discrimination happen less often? Another way to say this might be if the narrator has less of that "boy" inside herself, would the discrimination occur less? Maybe the purpose of that fourth line is

simply to show readers the truly wild experience of gender confusion. This character is neither boy nor girl, yet is both. Symbolically, the fifth line of the sec- ond stanza is another powerful remark about gender confusion. He creates something. He takes it away. It is the ultimate in transformation or destruction bringing something into being and then erasing it.

The third stanza of "The Boy" shifts back into first person point of view, as at the beginning of the poem. The first line in this stanza ("I'll never be a man, but there's a boy") tells us that the narrator cannot be a man, yet she acknowledges the undisputed male presence within herself. "Crossing out words" in the second line refers back to the original mention of writing and crossing out lines. On a deeper level, the word "crossing" alludes to crossing boundaries, or existing in such a way as this narrator does. Regarding these activities as "homework" is as close as the narrator can get to participating in day-to-day activities like linenmending, and Hacker states it baldly in the fourth line of this stanza ("The absence and the privilege of gender"). In other words, those with clearly defined gender identities have the "privilege" of a well-ordered world and mundane, usual happenings. The narrator is a person with an "absence of gender," a stunning concept in itself and made even more stunning by the stark economy of words that a poem demands.

Hacker continues to dig deeper into this concept; the narrator is not "neuter," but a "neutral human." The "fairy tale" is never identified, but the phrase is a thinly veiled reference to a derogatory remark aimed at a homosexual ("fairy"). Then, as if this were not enough, the narrator is insulted for his heritage and taunted by boys who shout "Jew!"

In the seventh stanza, "His story" is an intentional word play on "history" ("In his story, do the partisans / have sons?") The word "partisan" could be taken to allude to two situations that both affect this narrator: those who stood for one ideal during World War II, or those who hold strong, unmovable beliefs in the narrator's present-day life. "Partisan" implies a strong belief or focus on one identifiable system, whereas this narrator, because of who she or he is, lives life in a shifting understanding of gender identity, which does not necessarily follow previously established rules. The narrator is struggling to get to the crux of his identity ("Is he a Jew / more than he is a boy, who'll be a man / someday?") Both are sources of discrimination, but which define the narrator more?

The last stanza seems to return to the beginning of the poem (the narrator is looking out the window), but now the more distant third person point of view finishes off the poem. Again, the narrator demonstrates indecision (by writing something, then crossing it out), but, more importantly, the narrator shows deconstruction. The sentence ends with the word "out," an allusion to coming out as a gay or lesbian person in society. Truly, this narrator is a completely deconstructed person who asks, throughout the poem, How do I consider myself? Am I boy? Am I Jew? What am I? None of the usual rules of gender apply; this is the crux of the message of "The Boy."

A different, but no less effective, interpretation of this poem might assume that the narrator is a self-acknowledged homosexual male. Reading the poem this way still gives the reader the layers of complexity that are so prevalent in this poem. The "boy in me" can be taken to represent the narrator's inner essence, the part of him that will always be male even though society will never consider him a "man." When the narrator briefly wonders "if he were a girl," the phrase takes on a new meaning coming from a gay male narrator. If he were a girl, would he be teased in such a manner? He carries that essence of femininity inside him, just as surely as the female narrator (if interpreted in that way) carries "a boy" inside of her.

Perhaps what Hacker is saying is that it does not matter whether the narrator is male or female. The narrator simply is and is struggling to understand an identity that shifts and encompasses more than the commonplace world might be ready to understand. By presenting readers with an ambiguous narrator, Hacker effectively shows them what it is like to live with a shifting self-identity that fits no accepted rules.

Hacker plays with form and meter in "The Boy" though it is difficult to say whether the patterns presented are significant in the context of this poem. Most stanzas have an ABAB pattern, meaning that the ending syllables of the first and third lines of the stanza sound similar to each other, as do those in the second and fourth lines. The exception to this pattern is the second stanza, which has five lines and an AABAB pattern. This is also the stanza that first throws readers into new territory; one starts to realize that there is a lot more going on here than the original picture of a character looking out the window. Perhaps this deviation from pattern, and the addition of an extra line in this stanza, are meant to jar us as much as does the meaning of the text.

Similarly, with no discernible pattern, Hacker alternates lines of iambic pentameter with lines that vary from this pattern. The first two lines of the poem are in iambic pentameter. The third line of the poem is also iambic pentameter, with an extra unstressed syllable at the end of the line. The third stanza's second line starts out with an initial inversion of iambic pentameter, and then goes into iambic pentameter with another feminine ending. Two lines down, the line that ends with "gender" also ends with a feminine ending (the extra unstressed syllable), perhaps an intended irony for the reader to unearth. These inversions and variations on iambic pentameter may work to keep readers from getting too comfortable or grounded as they read the poem.

In a *Ploughshares* interview, Hacker is described as gloriously defying "all attempts at easy categorization." A *Publishers Weekly* review praises the poet's "strength of will with an evenness of tone" and claims that Hacker is "at her strongest when most stark and direct." Surely, "The Boy" is all these things, which is entirely appropriate given its subject matter: shocking, skillfully rendered, and not easily pinned down.

Source: Catherine Dybiec Holm, Critical Essay on "The Boy," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review, Cameron discusses the themes of transience found in Hacker's collection Squares and Courtyards*.*

Marilyn Hacker's ninth collection is written under the aspect of transiency. Reflected in the poems are the realities of a breast cancer diagnosis, mastectomy, chemotherapy, a body no longer whole, the fear of recurrence, the waking up to the "scandal" of death; also the illnesses and deaths of relatives, friends, acquaintances, strangers: other sufferers from cancer in the poet's circle, the victims of AIDS and drugs cared for by her lover, the poet's daughter's best friend in a car crash, the poet's grandmother in a pedestrian accident long ago, the victims of the Holocaust and World War II, a vital elderly friend, a revered older poet (Muriel Rukeyser), a homeless man whose funeral is described. Geographical transiency also pervades the book: the poet lives half in New York, half in Paris, and at one point settled in Ohio, only to be abruptly uprooted after starting a garden. The poem that relates this event, "Tentative Gardening," also laments the brevity of the connection with Nadine who had supervised the planting: "and I wonder where and from whom I'll learn to / put in a garden." Friends fade out in the transcontinental shuffle; strangers (like the schoolgirls in "Rue de Belleyme") appear as vivid images, give rise to equally vivid speculations about their lives, and move offscreen again. One of the central poems "Again in the River" shows the poet sitting beside the Seine; the book might have had for a motto Heraclitus's "All things are in flux."

The poet both fights and celebrates the flux, as if from a deep understanding that life and death cannot be separated. One strategy against the flux is, of course, form: "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines / And keep him there," as Millay wrote. Hacker is one of the masters of form of the age, and once again she proves her dexterity with the sonnet, the crown of sonnets, terza rima, sapphics. All the poems in the book are rhymed, except for a set of haiku, but the rhymes are so discreetly worked into the text that one can fail to notice them. A particular pleasure is the way exact and offrhymes are blended without awkwardness, as in the final sonnet of "Taking Leave of Zenka," where the rhymes are: wound/ interred/ bird/ around/ beyond/ blurred/ shirred/ friend/ son/ floor/ rudiments/more/ France/afternoon. The meter, with varying degrees of rigidity, manages to be equally unobtrusive. The closing of the formal circle comes each time as a victory over the dissolving stream.

Another strategy for chaos control is the sharp focus on the particular: "as if dailiness forestalled change." There is a constant invocation of "innocent objects": "a tin plate, a basement / door, a spade, barbed wire, a ring of keys," cherries in an outdoor market (six varieties), a dog's coat, "spiced pumpkin soup," "Tissue-wrapped clementines / from Morocco," the sci-fi paperback a homeless man is reading. By fixing the names of these objects in the sound-texture (always rich and bristling) of the verse, the poet reaffirms the fact of her existence, and the existence of her friends and fellowsufferers and all the displaced, here and now and again in that ghostly semblance of permanence that the text gives ("Persistently, on paper, we exist").

But of course objects like a spade and barbed wire are not innocent. Neither are the cherries, as it turns out (they lead to birds, then to the yellow bird whistle, which the poet's grandmother had just bought for her at the moment of that long-ago fatal accident). Objects have associations that take one elsewhere in space and time, and the movement of the poem as a whole often seems to be determined by free association, by the stream of consciousness. Thus in the title poem, "Squares and Courtyards" (which received Prairie Schooner's Strousse Award in 1998) the poet is at first standing in the Place du Marche Sainte-Catherine, eating a baguette. She sees (or imagines?) a schoolgirl chewing on a pencil at a window. She thinks back to her own childhood, the courtyard of the house in New York where she grew up. By a train of association involving discussions of Holocaust news, ashes, chain smokers, she is drawn back to a sidewalk cafe on the Place du Marche Sainte-Catherine, where people are smoking and discussing personal and political events "as if events were ours to rearrange / with words[. .]." Then back to her own childhood, her early experience with languages and language: "I pressed my face into the dog's warm fur / whose heat and smell I learned by heart, while she / receded into words I found for her." Then into a meditation about how words replace things, give an illusion of summing them up, create expectations that reality declines to fulfill, and yet themselves represent a reality that can be lost, as in the case of the grandmother ("It's all the words she said to me I miss"). Then come questions about the languages of the poet's parents and grandparents. Finally the poet (who seemed to be alone at the beginning of the poem) appears to be speaking with a "she" (a friend? a daughter? a double?) who "walks home / across the Place du Marche Ste- Catherine." Once in her own room, this figure will "scribble down" the "cognates, questions, and parentheses" and become the imagined figure of "the schoolgirl at the window, whom I'm not." The poem's movement implies that the poet is only one vessel, so to speak, for a stream of language, consciousness, thought, which will pass through her to others. The final figure of the schoolgirl in the window is perhaps the reader, who will try in her own way to realize the aspirations that were the poet's: "thinking: she can, if anybody could."

This conclusion is of course not reassuring. What is in store for the schoolgirl: "Is there a yellow star sewn on her dress"? Moreover, the schoolgirl may not even exist; the conversation between the poet and the schoolgirl is only imagined. In "Again, the River" the poet will ask: "Who do we write books for□our friends? our daughters?," thus questioning (as many have recently) the existence of poetry's audience; and the question takes on a further edge from the reminder in "Squares and Courtyards" that a poet's kith and kin are under no obligation to find her words helpful or meaningful. And while the figure at the window may still dream, the poet has found out that she will "get old (or not) and die"□and also, by implication, that she "can" not, because no one "could."

So the poem becomes a repeated grasping after what slips away, and the book as a whole becomes an assemblage of images that at times seem less woven together than retained in juxtaposition on account of accidental collisions that marked the reporting self (like that terrible childhood accident that surfaces toward the end of the book, as if it were a kind of explanation for everything). No abstract meaning could subsume these details; that would go against the poet's fierce assertion of the unrepeatable uniqueness

of each instant, each object, each person, as against the great void of nothingness and death. There is an anti-hierarchical insistence in the individual portraits of street people, which a structure of symbol, myth, archetype would only gloss over. But as a result, form too comes to seem permeable. The "squares and courtyards" of the poems, like the past and present moment, are not closed-off spaces but just eddies in the flow, nodes in the network. The traditional sonnet starts something and then finishes it, stands there as a Gestalt with a clear outline within which the details are balanced and interconnected. But in a sonnet like "And Bill and I imagined lives in France," the details contained within the form can seem like strangers who happen to be ascending or descending in the same elevator, each one more closely related to things outside the elevator (to analogous objects or moments in the book as a whole) than to the other passengers. But that is, we see, the form of contemporary life. Finally the work comes to seem like a single poem, a sign that Hacker has achieved, despite all the apparent fragmentation, a texture in which the details are, finally, at home. The associative flow dissolves the contour of individual poems, as it dissolves the poet's sense of being wholly at any point in spacetime; but it also connects the different points in spacetime, pulls them together and makes them part of the Now: "Every- / place / is Here and is Today," as Paul Celan wrote in *The No-One's-Rose.*

Here and there a passage raises different questions. "Broceliande" harks back to an early interest in mythmaking and magic that is largely submerged here: "Yes, there is a vault in the ruined castle. / Yes, there is a woman waking beside the / gleaming sword she drew from the stone of childhood." But this ironic compliance with a request for symbolism is soon deflated altogether: "Sometimes she inhabits the spiring cities / architects project out of science fiction / dreams, but she illuminates them with different / voyages, visions: // with tomato plants, with the cat who answers / when he's called, with music-hall lyrics, workscarred hands on a steering wheel, the jeweled secret / name of a lover." Again we are told that there are no great symbols, only the things that have meant most to one person and what those things tell us about that person, as a lover and activist. At the same time, the mythical world that has been invoked imbues these particular particulars with a slight magical aura: is the cat a familiar, is the jeweled secret name a charm? One thinks here of the powerful "Rune of the Finland Woman" in *Assumptions* (1985), or that early, splendid sestina, "An Alexandrite Pendant for My Mother," which didn't even make it into *Selected Poems 1965- 1990.* One wonders if myth could return to poetic universe. Myth is after all an organizing device, a source of power; don't the dispossessed need it too?

Related questions start up when one reads the following:

However well I speak, I have an accent
tagging my origins: that Teflon fist,
that hog wallow of investment
that hegemonic televangelist's
zeal to dumb the world down to its virulent
cartoon contours, with the world's consent:
your heads of state, in cowboy suits,
will lick our leader's lizard boots.

My link to that imperial vulgarity
is a diasporic accident[.]

Suddenly, amid this scanning of a memory inflected by history, comes a statement that engages with the world polemically. In the Miltonic salvo of the fifth and sixth lines (one could imagine them as the closing couplet in a traditional sonnet), we are reminded that there is presently more at work than time and chance happening to all things: there is something actively at work against the nuanced world Hacker so lovingly invokes. The traditional poem, by coming to a sharp point, can supply the reader with ammunition (such as that couplet); its formal consistency has at certain times even helped readers to acquire consistency, to get their backs up and come together and offer a real resistance. (Example: Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children," which may have been of some use to the cause of labor reform.) Is then the decentered poetics of this book a poetics of resistance, or is it more a way of tentative survival while "waiting for the axe to fall," as "A Colleague" briefly suggests? Is an active resistance, over and above the acts of charity and generosity and loyalty which this book celebrates, still conceivable? Could the poet's wit and mythmaking skills be pitted more directly against the Dark Tower? But such questions indicate that the book's circle is not a closed one. Reading *Squares and Courtyards*, one has a sense of sharing in a struggle of life with death; and one puts it down fervently hoping that Hacker may live to one hundred and twenty.

Source: Esther Cameron, Review of *Squares and Courtyards*, in *Prairie Schooner*, Vol. 75, No. 3, Fall 2001, p. 186.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Augustine examines the themes running through the body of Hacker's work.

From the beginning of Marilyn Hacker's career her poems have established a unique counterpoint between classical rhyming forms□sestina, sonnet, villanelle□and blunt declarative sentences to display the deranged obsessiveness of contemporary minds. Her hard-edged language in the 1970s is darkly jewel-encrusted, redolent of a devastated inner world of difficult loving, tangled sexuality, and convoluted relationships. Semiprecious gems□onyx, amethyst, alexandrite□express the hardness, mystery, and richness of experience. Lured by the foreign and strange, Hacker invents "imaginary translations," playing with exotic locales and overblown emotions. Tours de force, these poems lead into her central concern, the elucidation of her own intense passions, whether sexual, moral, or political.

Love is the premier passion that runs as a continuing strand from the earlier to the later work. Because the poem sequence "Separations," from the volume of this title, is written in sonnet form, it deemphasizes obsession and becomes a graceful, almost Shakespearean delineation of the aspects of love, which always springs up lively and ubiquitous despite the poet's difficulties. But love arouses thoughts of death, as in the opening poem of *Presentation Piece* (1974), in which she speaks to "the skull of the beloved" as a brooding nobleman in a Jacobean play addresses the skull of his dead mistress. "The Navigators" foreshadows the heartbroken elegy "Geographer" in Separations (1976), a poem that unites in formal, sestina-like word repetition her continuing themes of death, cities, gems, language, and painful but persisting love.

As a descriptive phrase, "persisting love" grossly understates the obsession with a young lover that besieges Hacker for a year in *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* (1986). This "verse novel," as she calls it, is a book-length sonnet sequence that emphasizes physical love almost exclusively as the poet waits in various situations to be united with Rachel, called Ray. The poems perform in explicit, masculinized language a *Kama-Sutra* of fantasized ways of making love. When Ray breaks off the affair, the poet plunges into the utter bleakness, without perspective, of the coda's final poems. But the poems clarify an underlying motif: her lust arose from the foredoomed but irresistible wish to be young again. By 1990, in *Going Back to the River*, Hacker is on a more even keel, enjoying good food, drink, and the landscapes of two continents and appreciating quotidian objects. All is not pleasure, however, and the unassimilable horrors of wartime experience and the persecution of the Jews in France are evoked in "Days of 1944: Three Friends." Thus reminded of her Jewishness, Hacker meditates further on her ethnic background and her parents' lives in the title poem of the volume, as the rivers she goes back to□Thames, Hudson, Seine□are seen not as destinations but as reminders of the flux and uncertainties of experience.

In a sense, however, by the time Hacker wrote *Winter Numbers* (1994) flux had become a way of life. (She has homes in both New York and Paris.) Here the incorporation of

French words renders her forms more supple and varied while also enriching the poems' sense of place. Her internationalism lessens the pain of change, making it a modus vivendi, a respite from narrow American prejudices. But her consciousness of painful change escalates as personal losses through AIDS and cancer assail her. Death is the ultimate change that everyone fears. The word "numbers" in the book's title has multiple associations: with the metrics of poetry, with mileage, with dates and time periods, the length of time, for instance, between the diagnosis of an illness and surgery or death. In the book's last section, "Cancer Winter," meditation on her own uncertain fate after breast cancer is enlarged to include history and the fates of those dead in the Holocaust.

Hacker's delight in French culture and language led to her 1996 volume, *Edge*, translations of the poems of Claire Malroux, who is herself a translator of H. D., Derek Walcott, and other modern writers into French. The French poet's themes align with the American's: a consciousness of aging, "prescience of death," and effort to connect this tangible world in its quirky sounds and flavors with the eternal world. These preoccupations□particularly a sharp and tender sense of mortality□ also pervade Hacker's 2000 collection, *Squares and Courtyards*. Her favored form is the sonnet sequence, although she also likes the terse, imagistic three-line stanza characteristic of William Carlos Williams. In one section, "Paragraphs from a Daybook," she employs an interesting 15-line stanza invented by the poet Hayden Carruth, to whom the volume is dedicated. Close to a book-length unified narrative, it interweaves elegiac recording of deaths□youthful, accidental, elderly, inevitable□ with direct notation of survivors' lives. The settings shuttle between two continents, as Hacker herself does. Her travels provide a metaphor for the passage between life and death:

New passport stamps mark
the week of my, Ellen's and Zenka's border
crossings, unplotted flight-paths toward the dark

Haunted by death-consciousness, this work thematically builds on her earlier books. She has continued her commitment to make poetic intercession for women, blacks, homosexuals, Jews, whoever is ill and suffering. Her skilled use of form to serve candid observation, the ability to register ephemeral beauty, the strength to face loss and death for herself, for everyone□those powers infuse Hacker's poems and serve as markers of their profundity and accomplishment. Her long career continues to enrich the high tradition of English lyric.

Source: Jane Augustine, "Hacker, Marilyn," in *Contemporary Poets*, 7th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 2001, pp. 465-66.

Adaptations

Caedmon released an audiocassette titled *Poetry & Voice of Marilyn Hacker* (1984) with Hacker reading a selection of her poems.

Topics for Further Study

As a class, construct a time line of events concerning the plight of Jews in Europe in 1942 and post it in class. Could something like the Holocaust ever happen again? Discuss your answers as a class.

In groups, collect ads from the personals section of your local newspaper or from an online site such as Yahoo. Analyze the language men use to describe themselves and what they want in a partner. Then, analyze the language women use to describe themselves and what they want in a partner. Make a chart outlining the similarities and differences in both self-representation and representation of the desired partner. What does your analysis tell you about how men and women see themselves? What gender stereotypes do the ads illustrate?

List five descriptive phrases you would like a member of the opposite sex to use to describe you and then list five descriptive phrases you would like a member of the same sex to use to describe you. To what degree is what you would like to hear from a member of your own sex similar or different from what you would like to hear from a member of the opposite sex? What do these similarities and differences say about how you view yourself as a man or a woman? Discuss as a class.

Make a list of all the times when you are most aware that you are a man or a woman and all the times when you are least aware. What do these lists tell you about the idea of gender as a category of identity? Discuss in groups.

Compare the image of the schoolgirl gazing out the window in Hacker's poem "Squares and Courtyards" with the image of the boy in "The Boy." Discuss similarities and differences and what these depictions say about the importance of the image of the child in Hacker's poetry.

What Do I Read Next?

Hacker has developed a reputation as a lesbian activist sympathetic to the plight of oppressed minorities. Dorothy Allison, who has also written about lesbianism, published *Bastard out of Carolina* in 1992. This autobiographical novel tells the story of Ruth Anne Boatwright ("Bone"), who was raised in a family of poor Southern whites and molested by her violent stepfather.

Hacker's *Selected Poems, 1965-1990* (1995) contains selections from from five of her previous volumes and contains much of her best work, including some of her best-known sonnets, sestinas, and villanelles.

Hacker's first collection of poems, *Presentation Piece* (1974), was a Lamont Poetry Selection and won the National Book Award in 1975. It remains one of her most accomplished volumes to date.

Sheep Meadow Press published a bilingual edition of *Long Gone Sun* (2000), which is a collection of poems written by French poet Claire Malroux and translated by Hacker. This collectioin is about Malroux's childhood and her father's life in the French Resistance.

Hacker edited the Spring 1996 issue of *Ploughshares*, which focuses on literary, gender, and racial diversity in contemporary American poetry.

Further Study

D'Emilio, John, and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, Harper, 1988.

This study provides a comprehensive account of sexual attitudes, conflicts, practices, and legislation in American history and also aims to debunk notions that today's sexual behavior is more liberated than in the past.

Frank, Anne, *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition*, edited by Miriam Pressler, Bantam Books, 1997.

Originally published in 1947, this classic book is the account of a young Jewish girl living in hiding from the Nazis in Amsterdam. Frank and her family were later discovered and sent to concentration camps. Frank died at Bergen-Belsen, Germany, in 1945.

Fuss, Diana, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*, Routledge, 1989.

Fuss analyzes essentialism in this groundbreaking study, taking apart its assumptions one by one.

Gamble, Sarah, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, Routledge, 2001.

In this text, Garber offers more than a dozen chapters and more than 400 A-Z dictionary entries on topics such as the history of feminism, postfeminism, men in feminism, feminism and new technologies, and feminism and philosophy.

Garber, Linda, *Identity Poetics*, Columbia University Press, 2001.

Garber, an associate professor in the department of English and the Program for the Study of Women and Gender at Santa Clara University, calls for recognition of the role of lesbian poets as theorists of lesbian identity and activism.

Riley, Denise, *Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History*, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Riley explores how the socially constructed category of women has shifted through history.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

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When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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