Cavalry Crossing a Ford Study Guide

Cavalry Crossing a Ford by Walt Whitman

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Introduction

"Cavalry Crossing a Ford" was first published in 1865 in *Drum Taps,* a collection of poems Whitman wrote during the Civil War, and was later incorporated into *Leaves of Grass*. The specific inspiration for this poem is not known, but Whitman did work as a nurse during the Civil War and may well have written this piece upon witnessing a cavalry troop crossing a river. Unlike the majority of poems Whitman penned during the Civil War, "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" does not use the firstperson "I" to put the scene it describes into a particular context. Instead of filtering the scene through a first-person narrator, the speaker of the poem journalistically presents a series of images and entreats the reader to "behold" the scene as though he or she were the first-person observer. It is as if the speaker imagined his reader standing beside him and seeing exactly what he sees as he sees it.

Perhaps the most interesting facet of the poem concerns the perspective from which the scene is observed and presented. The panoramic quality of the images suggests that the observer (implicitly, the reader) is viewing the scene from some distance. The whole of the cavalry troop is seen at once, as though the reader were looking down from some great height. However, from this vantage the reader is ultimately unable to distinguish the particulars of the scene from the larger whole. Each individual soldier becomes merely part of the "they" that makes up the entire cavalry, and no particular individual is given special attention or distinction in the scene. The climax of the poem then comes in the last line, when suddenly the focus is on the "guidon flags." While the reader has thus far been unable to distinguish the individuals who make up the cavalry troop, now the relatively small flags and even the particular colors they contain are described in detail. Such flags ultimately suggest political allegiance and serve to distinguish the two opposing forces of the battle. In turning attention to the flags, the poem presents a specific manner of viewing the world, one in which individual human beings are no more than their political allegiances. This mindset was no doubt prevalent during the Civil War, a time when people were compelled to choose sides, and self-preservation depended upon distinguishing one's comrades from one's enemies. That the "guidon flags" are seen to "flutter gayly" implies that the approaching cavalry troop poses no threat. The poem ends here, leaving the reader with the impression that attention to the scene is no longer necessary; the speaker has conveyed what is important.

Author Biography

The second of nine children, Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, on Long Island, New York, to Quaker parents. In 1823, the Whitmans moved to Brooklyn, where Whitman attended public school. At age eleven he left school to work as an office boy in a law office and then as a typesetter's apprentice at a number of print shops. Although his family moved back to Long Island in 1834, Whitman stayed in Brooklyn and then Manhattan to become a compositor. Unable to find work, he rejoined his family on Long Island in 1836 and taught at several schools. In addition to teaching, Whitman started his own newspaper, the *Long Islander*. He subsequently edited numerous papers for short periods over the next fourteen years, including the New York *Aurora* and the Brooklyn *Eagle,* and published poems and short stories in various periodicals.

Whitman did little in terms of employment from the 1850 to 1855. Instead, he focused on his own work, writing and printing the first edition of his collection of poems *Leaves of Grass*. Over the next few years, Whitman continued to write and briefly returned to journalism. During the American Civil War he tended wounded soldiers in army hospitals in Washington, D.C., while working as a copyist in the army paymaster's office. Following the war, Whitman worked for the Department of the Interior and then as a clerk at the Justice Department. He remained in this position until he suffered a paralytic stroke in 1873. Although he lived nearly twenty more years and published four more editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman produced little significant new work following his stroke. He died in Camden, New Jersey, on March 26, 1892.

Poem Text

A line in long array where they wind betwixt green islands,
They take a serpentine course, their arms flash in
the sun—hark to the musical clank,
Behold the silvery river, in it the splashing horses
loitering stop to drink.
Behold the brown-faced men, each group, each
person a picture, the negligent rest on the saddles,
Some emerge on the opposite bank, others are just
entering the ford—while,
Scarlet and blue and snowy white,
The guidon flags flutter gayly in the wind.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

The "they" of the first line refers to the soldiers who make up the cavalry troop mentioned in the title. This abrupt beginning differs greatly from the majority of Whitman's verse, in which he uses the 5 first-person "I" as the filter through which the poem is conveyed. Here, the "I" of the poem, the speaker, is merely implied. Instead of coloring the scene with his own perception, he relates it journalistically—objectively and with a nonjudgmental tone—presenting the image of the cavalry as it crosses a ford, a shallow place in a river. The scope of the image is so broad as to imply that the scene is being viewed from a distance and likely from some higher ground. The whole of the cavalry is presented as a vast single line twisting and turning snake-like through the landscape. The "arms" that glint sunlight in the second line refer then to the cavalry soldiers' rifles, and the "Hark," which simply means "listen," serves both as a command and an entreaty. In this manner, the speaker both asks and tells the reader to see the scene for himself or herself. It is as though he imagines the reader standing alongside him, hearing "the musical clank" of the distant soldiers' guns. While this is not a logical possibility, the speaker of the poem helps (or forces) the reader to visualize the scene by supplying images and cues. In addition, the use of assonance and consonance in these lines adds to the poem's musical quality and thus imitates the "musical clank" referred to in the poem. Indeed, "clank" is onomatopoeic, meaning that the sound of the word itself imitates the sound to which the word refers.

Lines 3-4

In these lines, the speaker continues to entreat, or command, the reader's attention. Again, the reader is asked to imagine the scene as though viewed first-hand. The first image of making up the whole picture, of course, is the landscape, the "silvery river" that the cavalry is in the process of traversing. Next are the horses that stop mid-river to drink, and finally, the "brown-faced men." Note that while the speaker says that "each person" is a "picture," implying that each is in itself worthy of our attention, no single individual is given more specific detail. In this sense, the poem seems to contradict itself. While each and every soldier is presented as being an individual, the reader is never quite able to distinguish any single person from the group. The men are still plural, part of the whole.

Line 5

Line 5 establishes again the enormity of the scene. The reader sees all at once the long line of troops stretched across the river. In ending the line with the word "while," the speaker prompts anticipation in the reader of what is to follow. The position of the

subordinate conjunction "while" at the end of the line gives it an imperative quality, a sense of importance.

Lines 6-7

Here, finally, the subordinate clause begun at the end of line 4 is brought to completion. However, line 5 postpones this sense of closure for a moment. By offering descriptive adjectives before actually defining the objects to which they refer, the line keeps the reader waiting. Whitman added this descriptive line (line 6) in 1871, some six years after the poem's original publication, and its effect on the overall reading of the poem is extremely significant. In a sense the line prolongs the reader's uncertainty about what is to follow and heightens anticipation. This is particularly important since the final image of the cavalry, the image that is most particularized in the poem, is the "guidon flags," which are carried into battle to distinguish opposing armies. In a sense, the poem then defines the cavalry and all of its members according to their political allegiance. That the banners "flutter gayly" suggests that the cavalry in question is friendly and poses no threat, and it is for this recognition that the reader has been waiting. In a sense, the reader has been observing the entire scene with this one purpose in mind—to determine whether the approaching cavalry is friend or foe. Perhaps more important, however, is the political mind-set that the poem then exemplifies. In essence, the individuals portrayed in the poem seem less important than the "flags" signifying their political allegiance. It becomes irrelevant that the men who make up the cavalry are individuals with their own values and ideas. What matters is only whether they are friend or foe.

Themes

Identity

To the speaker of the poem, the soldiers that are described here have no individual identities but are important in their function as parts of the long, serpentine line of bodies. The speaker appreciates this scene for its artistic harmony, for the way the line of soldiers fits into the overall natural setting. Symbolically, the line of soldiers resembles the river, and the men, "brown-faced," blend into the natural setting like trees. Even the flag that the men follow as a matter of honor and identity is identified with nature by the use of the adjective "snowy." Seen from a distance, these men lose their individual identities, and as a group, the men lose the defining characteristics that separate humans from nature.

There is a brief section, in the middle of the poem, where readers are told to look at the soldiers as individuals and not as parts of a group. "Behold," Whitman tells his reader, "each person a picture." A few details follow which distinguish one group from another, but no details are given to make readers envision distinct, separate individuals.

The fact that these soldiers lack individuality and appear as part of a larger unit fits in well with the goal of most military training, which is to make soldiers think in terms of how they can serve their commanders, forgetting individual needs and desires. Soldiers wear uniforms and march in formation in order to identify themselves as part of a group; in this poem, Whitman extends that way of anonymous thinking to include their faces and postures. The fact that none of these soldiers is distinct from the others is a testimony to their success at fitting into their military roles.

War and Peace

A reader who is drawn into the poem's picturesque description of soldiers marching off to battle might easily forget for a moment about the serious, life-and-death issues involved when war is waged. The scene presented here is one of peaceful harmony, with horses loitering and men resting, the musical clank of the men's gear reflected by the poem's musical use of alliteration (repetition of consonant sounds) and assonance (repetition of vowels). The final line, describing how the "flags flutter gaily in the wind," in some way captures the tone of carefree comfort that pervades the entire piece.

This poem is effective precisely because its view of war contradicts the brutality that readers expect to find in a war poem. By presenting war- riors in their peaceful state, going about the mundane business of making their way across a river, Whitman humanizes war and reminds his readers that, aside from the excitement of battle, there are ordinary people involved in any military campaign. The contrast between the calm scene presented here and the violence usually associated with war is so extreme that the poem does not appear to be an attempt to fool readers into forgetting the horrors of

fighting. Readers are actually made more aware of the danger that these soldiers may soon face by the fact that it is so completely, conspicuously, obviously absent. There is no explicit peril in this scene, but the poem's syntax—such as the abrupt break of line 5, which hints at matters that are left unexamined—serves to remind readers that the peace pictured here is only temporary in wartime life.

Nature

Nature The fact that this is a cavalry regiment, composed of both men and horses, helps the poem emphasize the theme of nature. In one sense, the poem is a study of the interplay between nature and humankind. The military unit is a powerful symbol of humanity because it represents the extremes of human thought: the basic carnal blood thirst that drives violence, along with complex strategic logic. Unlike modern warfare, which is fought over long distances with computer-guided missiles, the soldiers of this cavalry are intimately bound to nature through their relationships with their horses and are required to adapt to the natural setting around them. In the scene presented here, it is a river, not the enemy, that they have to contend with. The fact that humans are a part of nature is emphasized by the poem's use of natural imagery: serpentine, to describe the look of the assembled column of men, and "brown-faced," which gives them a more natural tone than bare flesh and also serves to remind readers that these men have been out riding in the sun and the open air.

Order and Disorder

This poem relies upon an implied tension between what readers know about the destructive chaos of battle and the discipline of a well-trained military unit as it goes through basic maneuvers. The cavalry has various elements of rest and leisure involved in its task of crossing the river, but overall it keeps its central structure. This line of men is presented as being "in long array," using a word that usually refers to someone dressed up in formal clothes, as if their march is in itself some kind of organized presentation, a planned show, being performed for an audience. The poem supports this sense of a simple military maneuver as an orderly display by telling its readers to "behold."

Within this regimented order, though, the men and animals follow their natural tendencies toward disorder. Horses splash and loiter; men rest when they can, each following his own unique part, acting independently, depending on where he falls in the line. The implication is that someone viewing this scene up close would not be able to appreciate the cavalry's grand design, that it is only when seen from a far enough distance that the order in what they are doing becomes apparent.

Style

"Cavalry Crossing a Ford" is written in free verse, which means it adheres to no set pattern of rhyme or meter. Instead, it is organized around units composed of images and incorporates consonance and assonance in order to heighten the musicality of its verses.

Imagery refers to language used to communicate a visual picture or impression of a person, place, or thing. Images are usually defined as either fixed or free. "Fixed images," also sometimes called "concrete images," are specific and detailed enough so as to leave little to the reader's imagination. In contrast, free images are more general and depend upon the reader to provide specificity. In "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," for example, Whitman provides a series of images (both fixed and free) to present for the reader the larger picture of the cavalry troop. He writes of the "silvery river" and "the splashing horses loitering . . . to drink," as well as the image of sunlight glinting off the "brown-faced" cavalry soldiers' guns. The culmination of these "images," then, is the larger "image" of the cavalry as a whole.

Consonance refers to close repetitions of similar or identical consonant sounds where the main vowel sounds of the words are different. When such repetitions occur most frequently at the beginning of a succession of words, such consonance is called alliteration. When the repetitions come at the ends of words, they are known as slant rhymes. For example, in the lines below, the "l" sounds of "line" and "long" are alliterative. Similarly, the "nd" sounds at the ends of "wind" and "island" are slant rhymes:

A line in long array where they wind betwixt
green islands

Assonance refers to repetitions of similar or identical vowel sounds in a sequence of words. In the lines above, the long "a" sounds of "array" and "they" are examples of this. In the lines below, the repetitions of the "g" and "f" sounds exemplify consonance while the "in" sounds of "in" and "wind" are examples of assonance.

The guidon flags flutter gayly in the wind.

Finally, "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" also incorporates what is called end-line slant rhyme, which means the last words of each line all share assonant or consonant qualities: the "n" sounds in "islands," "clank," and "drink"; the "l" sounds in "saddles" and "while"; and the "w" sounds in "while," "white," and "wind." Ultimately both assonance and consonance serve to heighten the musicality of the poem by creating a richer rhythmic texture.

Historical Context

Causes Leading to War

There were numerous causes leading to the Civil War. The most prominent was the disagreement between the Union, comprised of northern states, and the Confederacy, comprised of southern states, regarding the issue of slavery. Well before the nineteenth century, slavery was a common practice in the United States, having continued in various forms and places since Biblical times. Among the Europeans who first came to America there were "indentured servants," who were poor white Europeans brought to the new land and made to work off the cost of their passage. Sometimes this was a voluntary contractual relationship, but convicts, children, and even people abducted from the streets were forced into servitude. The indigenous people who lived on the continent before European settlers arrived were also forced into slavery, but they proved too difficult to command and too susceptible to epidemics of European diseases. Whites and Native Americans found it easy to blend into crowds of their own people whenever they escaped their captors.

The trade in African slaves existed in America as far back as 1619, when captive Africans were brought to the Jamestown colony in Virginia. By the time the United States Constitution was adopted, people were already raising questions about the morality of the practice. Seven of the original thirteen colonies had either abolished slavery or were poised to do so by 1789. The states that relied on slave labor were the southern states, where the economy was primarily based on farming. The northern states were not open enough or warm enough to sustain huge farms like the South's plantations, and so the northern economy favored industry instead. As new states were added to the Union, supporters and opponents of slavery took pains to make sure that the other side did not gain any political power.

By the 1820 census, the population in the nonslave states was significantly greater than the population in the slave states, giving the former a majority in the House of Representatives. Feeling this disadvantage, southern politicians became more aggressive in their opposition to any measures that might limit slavery. The South's economy was much stronger than the North's; for instance, their main product, cotton, increased in value a hundred times over when the cotton gin was invented in 1793. As opposition to slavery arose in the North and across the entire civilized world, southern plantation owners took any means available to make sure that there would not be any laws passed to take their slaves from them. When outrage against the inhumanity of slavery became overwhelming, slaveholders considered the option of quitting the United States—seceding—and forming their own country.

The idea that this unsolvable slavery question might lead to two countries was bought up often throughout the 1850s, particularly in 1857, when the opponents of slavery considered splitting from the slaveholders at a "Disunion Convention." By 1860, the basic economic differences had greatly expanded. There were over twice as many

citizens in the free states as in the slave states, and the Union had 100,000 factories employing 1.1 million workers, whereas the Confederacy had only 20,000 factories with 100,000 workers. The Industrial Revolution that had swept across the civilized world in the nineteenth century had left the culture of the Confederacy untouched. As Kenneth C. Davis put it in his book, *Don't Know Much About the Civil War,* "Two countries, two ideologies. Despite the common ground of language, religion, race and heritage—America was primarily a white Anglo Saxon Protestant nation—the people of the day saw more differences between themselves. The simplest explanation for the war was that many in the Confederacy saw themselves being steamrolled by a northern economic machine that threatened every aspect of their way of life, hence the seemingly irrational contradiction in people proclaiming a fight for 'liberty' by defending the enslavement of someone else."

Secession began immediately upon the election of Abraham Lincoln, an opponent of slavery, in 1860. Federal officials across South Carolina quit their posts the day after the election results were tallied, and the state officially seceded from the Union in December. Georgia followed; then other southern states went along in the months between Lincoln's election and his inauguration in April of 1861. The month after his inauguration, the first shot of the war was fired when South Carolina militia troops fired upon Fort Sumter, a military installation maintained by the Union army.

The Civil War

The war lasted four years, from the firing on Fort Sumter to the South's surrender on April 9, 1865. The North seemed to have had the distinct advantage, with more men, more manufacturing facilities, and a navy that could keep foreign supplies from reaching southern ports. Most of the fighting was on southern soil, with the North taking a lead early—for instance, New Orleans was captured in April of 1862, costing the Confederacy its largest city and a key port for shipping goods up the Mississippi River. By the end of that year, though, the Confederacy was able to win some important victories, which gave it the momentum to invade the North at the beginning of 1863. In 1863, both sides suffered devastating losses at Gettysburg, one of the bloodiest conflicts of the war. After that, the tide shifted several times. The Union army was plagued by a lack of competent leadership, and supplies to the army of the Confederacy, as well as to the citizens of the South, fell dangerously low. The fact that the southern army was able to persevere for so long is attributed to the fact that Confederate soldiers had a sense of fighting to defend their cultural identity, rather than just fighting for an abstract principle.

In April of 1865, after a series of losses, the Confederate army finally surrendered. Over the course of the four years, more Americans died during the Civil War than have died in total in all other wars this country has fought. Five days after the surrender, President Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth, and the business of mending a country that had been engaged in bloody battle fell to Andrew Johnson, whose policy of granting full stature to southern politicians so angered the Congress that they tried to impeach him, falling just one vote short.

Critical Overview

"Cavalry Crossing a Ford" is in many ways indicative of Whitman's shorter poems, especially in the vivid description of the scene. The poem differs in the manner in which the speaker situates himself on the periphery of the scene. While the majority of Whitman's work is written in the firstperson, and usually the "I" of the poem is the center of the action or scene, in "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" the first-person "I" of the poem is merely implied and serves solely as a distant observer. This is particularly important in light of the fact that Whitman's biggest critical proponents argue precisely that what distinguishes his poetry is his selfreferential, egocentric outlook on the world. As John Updike explained in his essay "Whitman's Egotheism," Whitman's poetic egotism is "suffused and tempered with a strenuous empathy" and serves to recognize "each man's immersion in a unique and unexchangeable ego." In other words, Whitman espouses not only his individuality but the individual nature of all persons. Yet in "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," the individual characters observed in the scene are never quite distinguished from the larger military group.

In slight contrast to this interpretation of "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, in their book *Understanding Poetry*, suggest that the original unity of the cavalry as depicted in the first line "dissolves into details." They point out that each person and each group of people is given a sense of individuality if only in that "each" is "a picture." Brooks and Warren argue that in line 5, the speaker of the poem recognizes each man's individuality. What follows is then a reassembly of the parts back into the whole. As Brooks and Warren explain, the speaker of the poem, "having fractured his general impression into these individual 'pictures' . . . then begins to reassemble the whole. Again we begin to get a sense of the column as a unit, its head emerging on the far bank, the rear entering the stream. But still the scene has not come into sharp focus. It is only when our eyes fix on the guidons fluttering 'gayly' that everything is drawn together . . . we get a feeling of how the men who, for a moment, had become individual, just men watering their horses as casually and lazily as a farmer after a day in the field, are jerked back into their places in the unit, losing their identity in the whole."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

Kelly Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College and the College of Lake County. In this essay, he examines the reasons why Whitman used a tighter, more formal style in "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" than he used in other poems.

In Walt Whitman's poem "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," readers are presented with a rich, sublime example of how maturity can mold a writer's vision without necessarily hampering it. The poem was written after Whitman had experienced the Civil War and had been exposed to the horrible results of combat that he saw as a nurse at an army hospital in Washington. In this poem, readers do not see the immediate repulsion that he must have felt; there is no sign of war's violence, just an appreciation of the efficiency on display as dozens of humans move as one single organism, as the army has trained them to do. A reader might find the poet's control in presenting this scene to be craftsmanlike, even aloof. What is remarkable about it is the way that Whitman's style changed to reflect the gravity of life around him. Looking at his earlier work, from first editions of *Leaves of Grass,* one sees a celebration of the individual, focusing on the speaker and rambling on furiously for page after page with notions, associations, ideas, and interests. These works share the optimism that the people Whitman examined were all part of one functional body, which he identified, somewhat vaguely, as "America." As successful as these earlier, more personal, poems were, Whitman was just as successful with the camera-eye technique he used in "Cavalry Crossing a Ford." The ways in which his style differed from the earlier poems reflects the different worldview that exposure to war can cause.

The most obvious example for comparing this war poem to Whitman's earlier work would have to be "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," which was included in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1856. Like "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," it presents masses of people involved in the task of getting across a body of water, in this case New York's East River. But that is where the similarity ends. "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is nearly eight pages long, composed of hundreds of lines. It does not give readers a view of the people at whom the poet is looking, but rather a view of the poet looking at the people, tracking the emotions they stir in him: "Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!" the poet exclaims in the second stanza. The poem seeks to make a mystery of the mundane, to look at working people going to their jobs as some sort of natural wonder. They only seem at first to be the poet's peer group, though as the poem goes on, they appear to be different in every way. For example, a stanza from section 2 illustrates this:

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at
all hours of the day,
The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself
disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet
part of the scheme
The similitudes of the past and those of the future,

The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights
and hearings, on the walk in the street and
the passages over the river,
the current rushing so swiftly and swimming with
me far away,
The others that are to follow me, the ties between
me and them,
The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing
of others.

In this passage, the act of concentrating on himself drives the poet toward acute awareness of the differences between people, even as he tries to proclaim their unity. This is typical of Whitman's earlier poems. Even a poem like "I Sing the Body Electric" is made to draw attention to its central consciousness, the "I" that speaks the poem. One of Whitman's largest works is the book-length "Song of Myself," which presents a free-floating rumination about practically any subject that passes through the speaker's mind; the only real unifying factor is that it is, after all, just one mind, with broad interests and an unleashed imagination.

The introduction to the original edition of *Leaves of Grass* explained Whitman's reasons for writing what he wrote in the way that he wrote it. The introduction is presented in prose, not in poetic verse, but in verbal style it matches the freedom that he allowed himself in poems like "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." Amid sentences that run on for forty lines or more in places, Whitman explains that

the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic. Its quality goes through these to much more. Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted and their eras and characters be illustrated and that finish their verse. Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative and has vista. Here comes one among the well beloved stonecutters and plans with decision and science and sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms.

As an expression of these ideals, Whitman's style worked and has held up for a century and a half. He defined American poetry, just as he intended to, by combining a style unbound by tradition with a sharp appreciation of the American people, lingering on each person only briefly so that he would not make one seem more important than the others. In 1865, though, when he wrote "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," his point of view had shifted. He still looked at people as a group, but the imagery was no longer conveyed through an authorial "I." The speaker, whose thoughts tended to lead the earlier works from one subject to the next, is absent from this poem, giving it more focus in its use of concrete visual imagery.

Why? The most obvious answer is that the horrors of war tend to cut through any desire to look at life with a broad, philosophical perspective. The time that Whitman may have once spent asking himself what it means to be an American poet was spent on more

serious tasks, like caring for the suffering and burying the dead. The prospect of death, as one thinker pointed out, tends to focus one's attention quite quickly.

The problem with accepting this easy answer is that it erases some of the importance from Whitman's earlier works. If his poetry naturally distilled down to visual objectivity when he was faced with death, and if death is inevitable, then it would seem that his later, more succinct poems are more legitimate than its free-flowing predecessors. Works like "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" are clearly no less important or true than "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," and it would be a gross exaggeration to say that war poetry in general is more important than poetry that examines society's day-to-day operations. The idea of Whitman "maturing" during the war has to be carefully defined. Maturation put him in a different state of mind, one that was better for writing about war-ravaged America, but this is not the same as saying that the tighter, objective form of poetry is better in all cases.

Aside from the obvious change in poetic style, "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" is not really that different from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." It is a natural successor. In the New York City poem, the poet saw an almost infinite variety of cultures and mannerisms, so different that he could only find two elements that these people had in common: they were American, and one person was seeing them. In the war poem, there is no speaker, and the participants' national identity is established with emphasis on the uniforms they wear and the flag they march under.

Barbara Marinacci, in her book *O Wondrous Singer!* tells the story of Whitman watching columns of troops returning from a maneuver in the dead of night while he was travelling with the Union army during the 1864 Wilderness Campaign. This event was not necessarily the inspiration of "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," but his description captured the sentiments that are implied in the poem. "It was a curious thing to see those shadowy columns moving through the night," Whitman wrote later. "I stood unobserv'd in the darkness and watch'd them long. The mud was very deep. The men had their usual burdens, overcoats, knapsacks, guns and blankets. Along and along they filed by me, with often a laugh, a song, a cheerful word, but I never before realized the majesty and reality of the American people *en masse.*"

His goal, then, was the same with the short war poem as it was with the longer and looser works: to pin down the nature of the American character. A reader who was only familiar with "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" might think that "the majesty and reality of the American people" was only to be found in their differences from one another, in the clamor of different styles bouncing off each other and assaulting the poet's senses. It would have been easy for Whitman to be narrow-minded, to define America only as the beauty of order or the beauty of chaos. "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" are difficult to reconcile with each other only when Whitman is not given proper credit for the scope of his vision.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Blevins, a poet and essayist who has taught at Hollins University, Sweet Briar College, and in the Virginia Community College System, is the author of The Man Who Went Out for Cigarettes, *a chapbook of poems, and has published poems, stories, and essays in many magazines, journals, and anthologies. In this essay, he investigates Whitman's use of image and how it serves "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," as well as certain sound repetitions within the poem and how they and Whitman's diction or word choice work to formalize Whitman's free verse and produce "an attitude of wonder and awe."*

Walt Whitman is among the greatest and most original of American poets. He is among the most daring of poets from any age or nation, has had as much influence in our tradition as Shakespeare, and in many ways single-handedly gave birth to the modern movement in American poetry. His most significant work is "Song of Myself," but, because of its length, "Song" is rarely given the time and attention it deserves; still, students interested in Whitman should take the energies and glories offered in his shorter poems as inspiration for further reading. Much of what can be found in "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," is, for example, in "Song of Myself," which many critics believe to be one of the best poems ever written, or in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," which has also been considered one of the most original and haunting of all American poems. Although there is virtually no limit to the criticism available on Whitman—the reviews started coming in when the first edition of Leaves of Grass came out—and little limit to the approach we might take in our investigation of "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," here we'll concentrate on two poetic devices central to this poem's effectiveness and beauty, since they are both representative of Whitman's technique in general and crucial to an understanding of how all good poetry works to move and transform us. These poetic devices are (1) Whitman's use of the image and how it serves "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," and (2) certain sound repetitions within the poem and how they and Whitman's diction, or word choice, work to formalize Whitman's free verse and produce what we can call here an attitude of wonder and awe.

As many poets and other writers and critics have said in many ways and places, we cannot feel what we cannot see. This kind of statement wishes to condemn abstractions, or words expressing ideas without a direct appeal to the senses; it's the kind of statement that encourages the use of images. But what do these poets and writers mean by "image"? And how do images produce feelings? What are the images in "Calvary" actually doing? How do they work? American poet and critic Robert Bly, in "Understanding the Image As a Form of Intelligence," has this to say about the image:

In the image the human sees his relationship to some object or a landscape. The human intelligence joins itself to something not entirely human. The image always holds to the senses, to one of them at least, smell, taste, touch, hearing, seeing of color or shape or motion. Statements such as "The good of one is the good of all" abandon the senses almost successfully. The image by contrast keeps a way open to the old marshes, and the primitive hunter. The image moistens the poem, and darkens it, with

certain energies that do not flow from a source in our personal life. Without the image the poem becomes dry, or stuck in one world.

The American poet Charles Simic has said that the image "[re-enacts] the act of attention." This is a particularly useful definition to apply to Whitman's poem, since the first thing noticeable about "Calvary" is that it does indeed re-enact the speaker's observation. That is, by the time we've finished reading the poem for the first time, we understand that we have been looking at a scene, or at what we might call a verbal photograph. This verbal photograph has been made with a series of images—the poem begins with an image of a long line of men winding "betwixt green islands" and ends with an image of "guidon flags flutter[ing] gayly in the wind." Between these two lines—these are the first and seventh lines of the poem—are five more images, each one serving the poem in a number of ways.

The first line describes the line of men, as we have just seen, while the second line deepens this image by comparing the line of men to a snake with the word "serpentine." That is, the first line locates the poem in a specific time and place by telling us what the speaker is observing, and the second line makes this image of the calvary crossing the ford more complex by comparing it to a natural, earthy, and deeply symbolic or archetypal object. The second line also appeals to our sense of sound by telling us that the men crossing the water are producing a "musical clank," thus deepening our understanding of the speaker's experience on a sonic level. The third line of the poem introduces both the river, which the poet tells us is silver, and the "splashing horses" that are "loitering" because they "stop to drink." The fourth line moves away from the river and the horses and asks us to focus on the men again: "Behold the brown-faced men, each group, each person a picture, the negligent rest on the saddles." The fifth line includes an image of some men emerging "on the opposite bank" and others "just entering the ford."

A turn comes in the poem's sixth line, when the speaker shows us, with the word "while," that all his lines until this point have been preparing us for his last two images, which move away from the men, the river, and the horses to concentrate wholly on the "scarlet and blue and snowy white" flags that "flutter gayly in the wind." That is, on even a syntactical level, the poem is essentially periodic, moving gradually by way of the vehicle of one single, complex sentence to the final independent clause where the weight of the poem finally stops to rest. Thus, a kind of miracle has happened—the poet has shown us many things happening at once in a very short poem—we get to see men on both sides of the river, learn that some are "brownfaced," and some are "negligent"; we see the river itself, and the horses drinking, and yet the weight of the speaker's observation rests, in the end, on the flags. While Whitman also appeals to the senses by describing the flags in detail, this final image is also a symbol: it can be said to represent the Union Army's goal for a unified America as well as the idea of war itself. Thus, while the poem works by way of a series of linked images without making too many judgments about the pictures it presents, it nevertheless does produce, or reveal, a kind of attitude. The glorious thing about the speaker's attitude toward the calvary, and therefore the war, in this poem is that it is not specific; it is only implied. Several things

about the poem's diction or word choice can now lead us to think about that attitude, tone, or stance.

Let's look again at the poem's second line. As we have just seen, the poet continues with the description he began in the poem's first line by telling us that the men "take a serpentine course" and that "their arms flash in the sun." But there's a break or pause after "sun" in that line—both the dash and the word itself, which is "hark," mark this slight stopping point. Here the poet begins a direct address that he will reinforce twice. But it's a mysterious direct address: is the speaker of the poem addressing us or is he speaking to himself? Since the poem itself does not tell us who the poet is addressing, we must assume he is addressing both his readers and himself, and just the *potential* that he could be speaking more to himself than anyone else helps to produce a feeling of self-reflection in the poem—it helps gives the scene significance, since the poet seems to be urging himself not to forget this moment: "hark," the poet says, repeating, with the word-command "Behold," this imperative twice in the poem's third and fourth lines.

Whitman's wonder about the moment can be seen, as well, in his diction or word choice. Although he's describing a profound moment—a moment of vast historical, emotional, and psychological significance—he does not choose weighted or ominous words; on the contrary, he goes to great lengths to describe the scene in glowing terms—the river is "silvery," the horses are "splashing," the flag is both "scarlet and blue" and "snowy white," and—most significant of all—the "guidon," or soldier, "flags flutter gayly in the wind." Whitman's attitude toward the calvary is, thus, an attitude of wonder: he seems almost spellbound by the sight before his eyes.

As American critic Lawrence Buell says in his introduction to the Modern Library College Edition of *Leaves of Grass,* Walt Whitman "virtually invented free verse." Much has been written on Whitman's free verse and on free verse in general since *Leaves* was first published, and although Whitman's principles of construction are too complex to cover here, it seems important to point out that "free verse" cannot or should not be used to describe formless or shapeless poetry since form is central to everything from the pineapple to the human body. One of Whitman's controlling devices is a series of linked images. Whitman also uses sound to his advantage; he's nothing if not conscious of the music he makes.

The first line of the poem establishes an interest in both alliteration and assonance, or the repetition of consonant sounds in the first case and vowel sounds in the second. The line "*A line in long array* where they wind betwixt green *islands*" rhymes the dental *l* sounds as well the long *i* and a sounds, and this helps hold the poem together; it helps to formalize it in much the way complete end rhymes would in a sonnet. Whitman continues with his interest in both alliteration and assonance throughout the entire poem: he rhymes sibilants with the s sound and ends the poem in strong gutturals that he establishes early in the poem with the phrase "hark to the musical clank" and later in the poem with the words "group" and "negligent." Look at that last line again: "The guidon flags flutter gayly in the wind." Part of the pleasure we feel in this line comes from how fully it ritualizes the poet's "act of attention." The music here helps to heighten

the moment the poet is observing; it raises it from the mundane and everyday; it seers first in his memory and then in ours. It might also be worth noting that there's a beautiful tension established between the more musical lines and the less musical lines in this poem: a phrase like "Behold the silvery river" can be said to knock in a kind of tense juxtaposition against a less musical line like "others are just entering the ford": the less musical lines require less attention than the more musical lines and give us a moment's pause before we move on to the next set of sound patterns.

The tension between the poem's music and the poem's subject matter also reinforces both Whitman's attitude—which is one of wonder, as we have seen—and his daring; it is uncommon to address the subject of war in these shining and harmonious terms, and yet Whitman achieves a genuine sense of feeling for the soldiers and their circumstances and his own act of observation and attention. It's the music here that helps him do that. Part of his success is his willingness to behold, as he asks himself to do, the sight before his eyes. In *Twentieth Century Pleasures,* in an essay on images, the American poet and critic Robert Hass quotes "Calvary" in full, saying this about the poem:

[The poem] may have taken hints from the new act of photography, or from romantic genre painting, or even from Homer. It is, in any case, phenomental—a poem that does not comment on itself, interpret itself, draw a moral from itself. It simply presents and by presenting asserts the adequacy and completeness of our experience of the physical world.

It is well known that Walt Whitman found beauty in everything—in "The carpenter singing as he measures his plank or beam, / The mason singing as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work. / The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing." Thus it should come to no surprise to us that Whitman should find a kind of wonder in watching a cavalry crossing a ford. Yet the stance or attitude is still somehow mysterious, especially to those of us who have grown up necessarily cautious about the horrors of war. This mysterious stance is the very thing that lead the American poet Randall Jarrell to say of Whitman: "they might have put this on his tombstone: WALT WHITMAN: HE HAD HIS NERVE," or to compel D. H. Lawrence, the great English novelist, to remark that "Whitman has gone further, in actual living expression, than any man, it seems to me [he] has gone forward in life-knowledge. It is he who surmounts the grand climacteric of our civilization." Given the vigor of these proclamations, students would be remiss indeed not to give Walt Whitman their own best attentions.

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Erica Smith Smith is a writer and editor. In the following essay, she examines how "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," although a description of healthy men preparing for battle, is a tender eulogy for many of these soldiers who are about to fall in battle.

Walt Whitman's poem "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" was originally published within the volume *Drum-Taps* (1865) and was later collected within a later edition of *Leaves of Grass*. First appearing in 1855 as a self-published volume of just ninetyfive pages, *Leaves of Grass* contained what came to be Whitman's most famous poem, "Song of Myself." *Leaves of Grass* swelled over the years to become Whitman's opus, absorbing all of Whitman's writing, even the volumes that were originally issued separately (as were *Drum-Taps* and, later, *Passage to India*, 1871.

Whitman wrote, cut, and rewrote *Leaves of Grass* extensively through nine editions, the last edition issued in 1891-1892. The first edition is described by critic James Woodress as "the work of [a] somewhat brash, 36-year-old Brooklyn carpenter-poet." Employing a sweeping free verse, *Leaves of Grass* was a treatise from one with an unrestrained sense of self and an epic, mystic consciousness. Within his verse, Whitman described his own style and self as "crude." Yet he persisted in finding a kind of heroism in breaking barriers: "Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!"

Although Whitman's style was inarguably his own, Whitman drew from numerous influences. The essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson were a major influence on Whitman; Whitman once remarked, "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil." In addition to Emerson, the influences on Whitman's free verse seem to have been music—opera in particular—and the Bible. Like these forms, Whitman's verse was grandiose, using techniques such as symbolism, repetition of words and themes, and parallel phrases. The resulting sounds and feelings in Whitman's poetry have a natural, organic feel and are very musical if read aloud. On these influences Padraic Colum of the *New Republic* writes:

All is urge in his poetry. His rhythms flow and break like waves. His stanzas have not the measure that belongs to the poets of a world that is established poets like Dante and Spenser, for instance but the balances that are seen in nature one living member balancing another living member, as in a branching tree.

The world's response to *Leaves of Grass* was mixed. Some, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, lauded Whitman's mysticism and individualism. In response to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Emerson wrote Whitman: "I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. . . . I greet you at the beginning of a great career." Yet Whitman's work was not universally welcomed. Victorian sensibilities scorned the sexual themes that characterize parts of *Leaves of Grass*, particularly the "Children of Adam" poems dealing with heterosexual love and the "Calamus" poems on homosexual feelings and relationships. Yet sexuality is but one aspect of Whitman's

work. More important, over the years the poet's vision was maturing; the themes of love and death were filtered through experience and wisdom. The resulting later poems have an elegiac, and sometimes haunted, feel.

The Civil War in particular had an indelible effect on Whitman. Working as a volunteer nurse in Washington and visiting Virginia battlefields during the Civil War, Whitman was often a firsthand witness to the suffering that was occurring during wartime. His anguished letters of this period, recounting details about soldiers he tended, indicate that Whitman was suffering deeply as well. Out of this experience comes *Drum-Taps,* which critic Perry D. Westbrook calls "the best collection of war poetry produced by any American writer." Of this crucial volume, "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" is a poignant touchstone.

The poem describes a line of cavalry—troops on horseback—as it travels "betwixt green islands" within a river. It is the beginning of the Civil War, and the troops are heading toward a battlefield. However, rather than being foreboding, the scene that Whitman describes here is peaceful. The troops wind their way, their weapons glinting sunlight. The cavalry's weapons and saddlery knock together; "hark to the musical clank," Whitman bids the reader.

The river itself is hushed and silvery; the "splashing horses" halt a moment to drink the water. This image of nourishment, too, is tranquil; it is not at all indicative of the battle that is to come. Whitman speaks directly to the reader, inviting one to "behold" the sight of the horses; in the next line he again implores us, "Behold the brown-faced men, each group, each person a picture, the negligent rest on the saddles." The men are tanned and handsome, presumably healthy, resting easy in their saddles as their horses drink the water.

Whitman pulls the lens back a bit, far enough to get the overall picture of the line of cavalry stopped at the islands in the river. "Some emerge on the opposite bank, others are just entering the ford." The reader gets a sense of how long the line of cavalry really is; presumably the line will keep on filing through. Whitman's view then pulls even farther back, to a flag that is waving over the troops, "scarlet and blue and snowy white." The reader is reminded of the patriotic cause for which the men are traveling and will soon fight, leaving the reader with a feeling both poignant and unsettling.

Of Whitman's poetry Colum notes, "In Whitman's epic we do not find a people. He shows us America, but it is America in vista, and it is filled not with people, but with processions." Yet the poems that surround "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" within *Leaves of Grass* come closest to giving us the feeling of the worries and experiences of individual people. The preceding poem, "The Centenarian's Story," for example, tells a very different, individualized war story. In it, a survivor of the Revolutionary War details the Battle for Brooklyn. He describes how the British troops arrived by ship just before the Declaration of Independence was read by the commanding general, likely General George Washington.

The centenarian recounts how the British troops of 20,000 men, supported amply by artillery, disembarked and prepared for war. The centenarian tells in particular of one brigade of the youngest men that went forward to engage the redcoats and were cut off and slaughtered, pounded by artillery, and attacked mercilessly by superior forces, with few surviving. The rest of the army then retreated. Whitman then imagines that he himself was an observer of the scenes leading up to this battle. He writes of seeing an army advancing for battle and then the battle slowly but steadily being joined.

"Cavalry Crossing a Ford" is given an even deeper context when considered alongside the poems that succeed it, including "An Army Corps on the March," "Come up from the Fields Father," and "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night." Here, the images of death and loss come into sharp focus. In "Come up from the Fields Father," the reader witnesses a family receiving a letter about their soldier son. The family is terrified when they read that the son has been shot in a cavalry skirmish; the daughter tries to calm her mother, noting through her sobs that the letter says he will recover soon. Yet Whitman's voice informs us that the son is already dead, and his matter-of-fact tone carries a heavy burden of grief.

"Cavalry Crossing a Ford" and its companion poems show Whitman at a crucial moment as a poet. Eulogizing the fallen soldiers and his wartorn country and soon to eulogize the fallen president who was so beloved to him, Whitman issues these verses at the height of his empathy and insight.

Source: Erica Smith, Critical Essay on "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

A 1987 video entitled *Walt Whitman,* from the *Great Works of American Literature* series, is available from Focus Media Inc. It is written by Elizabeth Ralph and directed by Jim Cronin.

Dover Press has an audiocassette edition of *Walt Whitman's Selected Poems,* from their "Listen and Read" series, recorded in 1987.

Mystic Fire Audio has a 1997 cassette selection of Whitman's poems available in its Voices and Visions series, entitled simply *Walt Whitman.*

The audiocassette *The BBC Collection of War Poetry* uses music and sound effects to bring the best war poetry from throughout the ages to life.

The Walt Whitman Hypertext Archive available at http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/whitman/ index.html (last accessed April 2001) has links to works by Whitman, reviews of his poetry, biographical information, etc. It is maintained by Charles B. Green (August 10, 1999).

Topics for Further Study

Write a poem that gives an impressionistic description of something happening near where you live, viewing it from a far distance.

Research the guidon flags of different regiments of the Union and the Confederacy in the Civil War and report on the stories behind some of them.

Explain how the last line changes the tone of this poem. Explain how it changes the poem's meaning.

Find memoirs of people who served in the armed forces during recent campaigns, such as the actions in the Persian Gulf or in Bosnia, and compare the ways they describe travel between battles with the way Whitman describes this army.

Some rivers could be crossed on horseback, while others were just too wild. Find out what conditions would apply: what depth is safe to take horses across, what current they can resist, etc. Report your findings.

Compare and Contrast

1865: The United States Civil War ends when General Robert E. Lee, representing the Army of the Confederacy, surrenders to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, on April 9. The last regiment of the Confederate army does not officially surrender until the end of the following month.

Today: Peace treaties to end international conflicts are often supervised by an independent body, such as NATO or the United Nations.

1865: The principle methods of transportation are horses, steam-powered locomotive, and the steamship.

Today: Nearly nine million cars are sold in the United States each year, and airlines have more passengers than they can handle.

1865: An American inventor is able to create ice with a compression machine that he designed.

Today: Refrigeration and air conditioning are common and are taken for granted by most Americans.

1865: After losing the Civil War, the political structure of the South is taken over by unscrupulous politicians called "carpetbaggers," opportunists who moved there with cheap luggage made of carpets in order to take advantage of the situation.

Today: The southern states wield great power over the national political situation. On "Super Tuesday," many southern states hold primary elections for presidential candidates all at once, forcing candidates to cater to the political advantage that the South can offer them.

What Do I Read Next?

A good anthology of poetry from the Civil War, broken down into "Confederate Poetry" and "Union Poetry," can be found at http://www. civil-war.net (October 15, 2000).

Twentieth-century poet Robert Frost was a great admirer of Whitman, and his work certainly shows Whitman's influence. All of Frost's poetry is available in *Poetry of Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged,* published by Henry Holt in 1979.

Emily Dickinson wrote at the same time as Whitman. Her poem "I Like to See It Lap the Miles," available in *The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1890), resembles "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" in terms of visual perspective.

A good overview of Whitman's works, including this poem, is available in *The Viking Portable Walt Whitman* (1945), edited by Mark van Doren.

There are many good anthologies of Whitman's works, but fans of "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" might be interested in finding a copy of *Walt Whitman's Civil War,* compiled from published and previously unpublished sources in 1961 by Walter Lowenfels.

The book *Walt Whitman's Camden Conversations,* selected and arranged by Walter Teller in 1973, contains a number of quotations from the poet in the later years of his life, including a section with his thoughts about war.

In 1981, Jim Perlman, Ed Folsum, and Dan Campion compiled a collection of essays, poems, and reviews about Whitman from different historical eras since his time in their book *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song.* Students can see how the poet's reputation has evolved over the years.

There are numerous books dedicated to the Civil War. Students can be overwhelmed by all of the details made available by historians. One very readable book is Webb Garrison's *A Treasury of Civil War Tales* (1988), which gives a chronology of the war in anecdotal form.

Further Study

For Further Study Morris, Roy, Jr., A Better Angel: *Walt Whitman and the Civil War,* Oxford University Press, 2000.

Morris examines the impact of the war on Whitman's life and poetry. He weaves biographical information in with Whitman's poetry to help students understand Whitman's work.

Paludan, Phillip Shaw, *"A People's Contest": The Union and Civil War,* 1861-1865, Harper & Row, 1988.

Paludan explores the interrelationship between two of Whitman's frequent themes, war and work, as he views war through the lens of the other great event of the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution.

Reynolds, David S., *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography,* Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

This recent biography gives a good sense of the cultural background of Whitman's time, relating his life to the social events surrounding it.

Zweig, Paul, *Walt Whitman: The Making of a Poet,* Basic Books, Inc., 1988.

This book is mostly concerned with Whitman's earlier life and might not be of much interest to students of his Civil War poetry. Still, students desiring a broader scope will want to see his style develop into what it came to be.

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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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