The Chambered Nautilus Study Guide

The Chambered Nautilus by Oliver Wendell Holmes

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

With its rich imagery and ringing verse, □The Chambered Nautilus,□ by Oliver Wendell Holmes, is one of the most enduring nature poems of the mid-nineteenth century. Its subject is the nautilus, a sea creature that lives inside a spiral shell. As it grows, the nautilus makes new, larger chambers of its shell in which to live, closing off the old chambers and gradually forming a spiral. Holmes compares the nautilus to a □ship of pearl□ sailing through enchanted but dangerous waters until it is wrecked. The speaker or narrator of the poem uses the nautilus as a metaphor for the human soul, stressing that its example provides a □heavenly message□ of how people should grow and develop through their lives. At the end of the poem, Holmes emphasizes the idea that humans expand their horizons until they achieve the spiritual freedom of heaven or the afterlife.

Although it may appear abstract or timeless, □The Chambered Nautilus□ is grounded in the world of mid-nineteenth-century Boston, sometimes called the American Renaissance because of its flowering in literature, philosophy, and culture. Holmes□a medical doctor, poet, novelist, travel writer, scientist, essayist, philosopher, lecturer, and conversationalist□was a prominent figure in the literary and philosophical circles of his era. □The Chambered Nautilus□ was originally published in the new magazine *Atlantic Monthly* as part of a series combining poetry and prose that derived from Holmes's many stimulating conversational groups in Boston's intellectual society. In 1858, this series, called *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, was published in book form, and it was widely received as a witty and insightful work. □The Chambered Nautilus□ is available in collections such as *The Poetical Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, published by Houghton Mifflin in 1975, as well as in reprint editions of *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, such as that published by J. M. Dent & Sons in 1960.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1809

Deathdate: 1894

Oliver Wendell Holmes was born on August 29, 1809, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His father was a Congregationalist minister, and his mother was a member of what would become the Unitarian Church. After years of private schooling, Holmes attended Harvard College, where he began to translate and write poetry. He started to have his poetry published after college, while he was studying law. One of his most famous poems, "Old Ironsides," was published in 1830. A response to the news that the famous Revolutionary War ship USS *Constitution* was to be taken apart and used as scrap, the poem gained Holmes a wide audience and garnered the necessary public support to have the ship preserved.

Holmes quit studying law in 1831 in favor of a degree in medicine, and, in 1833, he traveled to France to continue his medical education. During his studies and upon his return to the United States, Holmes refused requests that he have more poetry published and dedicated himself to practicing medicine. In the late 1830s, however, Holmes became involved in a variety of pursuits that included lecturing and gathering in prominent conversation circles. In 1840, Holmes married Amelia Jackson. In 1841, their first child, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., a future U.S. Supreme Court justice, was born. A variety of Holmes's important articles about medicine were published, and he continued lecturing until his position on issues such as the abolition of slavery, which he opposed, drew too much criticism. In 1857, installments of Holmes's *Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* were published in the first edition of the magazine *Atlantic Monthly*. Posing as the record of a lively discussion group, *Autocrat* mixed prose with poetry; it contained some of Holmes's best poems, including "The Chambered Nautilus,"; and was very well received. Holmes wrote further installments of the series under the title *The Professor at the Breakfast-Table*, which was published in book form in 1860.

A collection of Holmes's medical essays and his novel *Elsie Venner* were published in 1861, and both received mixed reviews. During the Civil War, Holmes wrote patriotic poetry and twice traveled to Philadelphia, because his son had been wounded in combat. Holmes's novel *The Guardian Angel* was published in 1867, and Holmes afterward focused on his medical research. His works on determinism and the brain were published in 1871 and 1875. After he retired from Harvard Medical School in 1882, Holmes concentrated on his literary work, editing his collected writings and writing a biography of the American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, a novel dealing with women's rights, a travel narrative titled *Our Hundred Days in Europe*, and a prose work titled *Over the Teacups*. Holmes died of respiratory failure on October 7, 1894, in Boston.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

The title □The Chambered Nautilus□ refers to a sea creature that lives in the western Pacific and the Indian oceans and has a hard external shell, or exoskeleton. The creature lives in and is able to withdraw into the outermost compartment of its shell, which consists of sealed sections and is one of nature's best examples of a logarithmic spiral, one that grows at an exponential rate and appears to expand while it grows. Line 1 calls the nautilus a □ship of pearl,□ which combines a comparison to a human-made sailing vessel with a description of the pearly finish of the nautilus shell. The speaker then notes that □poets feign,□ or pretend, that the nautilus □Sails the unshadowed main,□ or the wide-open waters.

Lines 3, 4, and 5 continue the conceit, or extended comparison, of the nautilus to a ship, creating an image of a □venturous,□ or adventurous, wooden ship whose □purpled wings,□ or sails, fly on the □sweet summer wind.□ This description sounds like some kind of magical fairyland, and the speaker notes that the ship, or nautilus, sails to enchanted □gulfs.□ A gulf is a large, partially enclosed body of water, and the word *gulf* has a secondary meaning of □chasm□ or □abyss.□ The speaker notes that □the siren sings□ in these gulfs. This image refers to the beautiful and seductive water nymphs of ancient Greek mythology that sang so beautifully as to lure sailors to be destroyed on the rocks surrounding their island. Lines 6 and 7 continue this imagery, describing coral reefs that □lie bare.□ This image refers to the beautiful yet dangerous reefs that can destroy a ship but is also vaguely suggestive of the nude □cold sea-maids□ who lie in the sun and dry their □streaming hair.□

Stanza 2

Stanza 2 discusses the nautilus's wreckage and death in the past tense. In line 8, the speaker's conceit continues and expands as the nautilus is said to have □webs of living gauze,□ or sails. It is important to consider which part of the nautilus refers to the sails and which indicates the □ship of pearl.□ Logic would suggest that the sails, or □purpled wings□ and □webs of living gauze,□ are the tentacles and head of the creature and that the pearly ship is the shell. In this stanza, however, the sails do not □unfurl,□ because the ship is □Wrecked□ and the nautilus is presumably dead.

In lines 10 through 14, the speaker describes the nautilus's empty shell, continuing to use the comparison of a ship. The speaker discusses □every chambered cell,□ referring to the compartments and rooms of a ship as well as the sections of the nautilus's exoskeleton, which it makes as it grows larger, closing off old compartments and moving into new ones. The speaker describes these abandoned cells as expired locations where the nautilus's □dim dreaming life□ used to dwell. Line 12 refers to the nautilus as a □frail tenant□ constructing □his growing shell.□ Line 13 refers to the

reader as □thee,□ suggesting that the empty shell lies directly in front of the reader. Line 14 describes the inside of the empty shell as having an □irised,□ or rainbow-colored, ceiling that has broken open and let the elements into what used to be a □sunless crypt,□ or coffin.

Stanza 3

Stanza 3 backtracks from the preceding description of the nautilus's death to describe in the past tense its lifelong □silent toil□ to create protective compartments in its spiral shell. In this description, the speaker seems to abandon the comparison of the nautilus to a ship, although Holmes's choice of words is characterized by terms of human construction, such as □coil,□ □archway,□ □door,□ and □home.□

Lines 15 and 16 emphasize the laborious repetition of creating the □lustrous□ shell, and the following two lines state that each year the nautilus abandons its previous chamber in favor of a new one that it has created to accommodate its larger size. Line 19 describes this process as stealing, or moving sneakily, □with soft step□ through the □shining archway□ that divides the chambers, as though the nautilus were human. This process of personification, or assigning human qualities to an animal or object, continues in lines 20 and 21. The speaker describes the seal that the nautilus forms to block off its old chamber as an □idle door□ (□idle□ probably means □unused□ in this context, as opposed to □useless□ or □unproductive□). In line 21, the speaker explicitly compares the nautilus to a person, describing it as □Stretched in his last-found home□ and noting that it □knew the old no more,□ or has shut out its past.

Stanza 4

In stanza 4, which changes to the present tense, the speaker addresses the nautilus directly and describes its effect on him. Line 22 thanks the nautilus for the □heavenly message□ it has brought, and line 23 describes the creature as a □Child of the wandering sea,□ which is a mysterious image because it is difficult to envision the sea itself as wandering. Line 24 suggests that the nautilus is wandering or □forlorn□ and has been cast from the lap of the sea as though the sea were its mother.

In line 25, the speaker reminds the reader that the nautilus is dead, but at the same time, he produces an image of a □note□ coming from its □dead lips.□ The next line continues this thought by stating that the note born from the lips of the nautilus is clearer than that which □Triton□ has blown from his □wreathèd horn.□ Triton is an ancient Greek demigod□or a being more powerful than a human but less powerful than a god□whose father is the sea god, Poseidon. Triton is usually portrayed as a merman, or a creature with the upper body of a man and the tail of a fish, although the name □Triton□ came to be used for a host of other mythological mermen and mermaids. The □wreathèd horn□ refers to Triton's great conch shell, which he blows like a trumpet to command the waves. In line 27, the speaker says that he listens to the clear note of the nautilus ring in his ear. In line 28, the speaker states that he hears the sound of the

nautilus as a □voice that sings□ in □deep caves of thought,□ which is an interesting image that ties to the description of the nautilus's many chambers.

Stanza 5

In the fifth stanza, the speaker addresses himself instead of addressing or describing the nautilus. In line 29, the speaker urges his □soul□ to □Build thee more stately mansions,□ implicitly comparing the nautilus's chamber-building to the process of building expensive houses. Line 30 exclaims that the speaker should build the mansions amid the swiftly changing seasons, or because time rolls along rapidly. In line 31, the speaker tells himself to leave the □low-vaulted,□ or low-ceilinged, □past,□ and in the next line he wishes that □each new temple,□ a new and important metaphor suggesting the religious holiness of the chamber or house, be □nobler than the last.□

Line 33 uses the phrase □Shut thee from heaven,□ which emphasizes the separation of the house or temple from the elements and from God, but the speaker paradoxically goes on to describe the ceiling as □a dome more vast□ that increases until the speaker is □free.□ Line 34 suggests that the speaker achieves this ultimate freedom by releasing himself into heaven, or dying. The final line reinforces this interpretation, noting that the speaker, like the nautilus, will leave his □outgrown shell,□ which refers to the speaker's body as well as a house, □by life's unresting sea,□ as though the speaker's spirit will rise out of the shell of his body and into heaven.

Themes

Development and Mobility

The discussion in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* that precedes □The Chambered Nautilus□ focuses on the various stages of life and the importance of making progress by moving on from what one previously knew. In a sense, the poem is an elaboration on this idea, because it focuses on the concept of sealing off one's previous boundaries to create new and larger spaces in which to live and develop. In the paragraphs before the poem, the autocrat of the breakfast table says that □grow we must, if we outgrow all that we love,□ stressing the need to keep moving and developing as one ages, even if it means that one leaves one's old relationships behind. Holmes envisions a process of spiritual and personal progress in which one constantly challenges oneself to become a better person.

□The Chambered Nautilus□ expresses this idea of progress, particularly in stanza 3, which describes the nautilus's practice of living only in the outermost and largest chamber of its shell, completely dividing itself off from the chambers that it outgrows. The poet depicts the nautilus's chambers as sealed, enclosed spaces, stating that they are like a dim □cell□ or a □sunless crypt,□ although they have rainbow ceilings and are □lustrous,□ or glowing. Stanza 5 compares the chambers (or what they will become) to noble, □stately mansions□ while noting that the previous chambers are □low-vaulted.□ This contradiction emphasizes that life is in a constant state of flux and that it is necessary to seal off the past in order to better oneself.

Holmes seems to imply that completely sealing off one's old relationships has its problems in the sense that this action can be considered turning one's back on one's friends. This may be why the speaker notes that the nautilus must sneak away □with soft step□ to its new dwelling, soon taking the attitude that it □knew the old no more.□ If people go through such a process, they may find that they are □forlorn□ like the nautilus and are children □of the wandering sea.□ Because life itself is an □unresting sea,□ however, Holmes also suggests that the process of spiritual and personal growth facilitated by leaving one's previous situation is a necessary act and an altruistic method of self-improvement.

Death and the Afterlife

Because the nautilus's building of its shell is an extended metaphor for the speaker's spiritual life, □The Chambered Nautilus□ can be interpreted as an allegory about death and the journey toward the afterlife. The idea that the human body is a ship or shell containing its spirit is not a new one, and Holmes clearly suggests that the nautilus's shell represents the physical covering of the human body and that the living creature itself represents the human soul or spirit. As early as stanza 1, Holmes hints that he is discussing dualism, the idea that the immortal soul is a separate entity from the mortal

body, when he characterizes the ship with □purpled wings□ like those of an angel. Holmes also suggests in stanza 4 that the nautilus provides a □heavenly message□ as though it were an immortal spirit providing advice to the living.

The most explicit discussion of the idea that the nautilus is a metaphor for the human spirit comes in stanza 5. The speaker instructs his □soul□ to build increasingly □nobler□ temples until he becomes free like the dead nautilus, whose shell has been pierced. Although the domes of the chambers of the speaker's soul □shut [him] from heaven,□ the last dome appears to break away when he leaves the □outgrown shell□ and ascends into the afterlife. The nautilus's journey toward immortality is somewhat perilous, given the deadly sirens, and it is a □forlorn□ and □frail□ creature resigned to □silent toil.□ This journey seems justified, however, because it creates the □heavenly message□ of the shell. Similarly, the soul's hard work on earth is seemingly rewarded with the □free[dom]□ of heaven.

Style

Personification

□Personification,□ or the attribution of human qualities to nonhuman objects or creatures, is an important literary technique in □The Chambered Nautilus.□ One of the poem's main extended metaphors compares a nautilus to the human soul, and the success of this metaphor depends on imagery that associates the nautilus with a human. Examples of this personification include the idea that the nautilus has a □dreaming life,□ its description as a □tenant,□ its stealing with □soft step,□ its ability to stretch out in a home, and the notion that it is a □child□ with □lips.□ All of these characteristics are not literally possible in a shelled aquatic creature, and they implore the reader to imagine that the nautilus is human. Holmes uses this technique to develop the idea that the nautilus is a metaphor for the human condition, because personification makes it easier for readers to imagine themselves as a nautilus.

Symmetrical Rhyme Scheme

□The Chambered Nautilus□ contains five stanzas, all of which follow the same rhyme scheme consisting of a rhymed couplet (group of two lines), followed by a rhymed tercet (group of three lines), followed by another couplet. Also written *aabbbcc*, this rhyme structure makes the verse flow musically by adding rhythm and musicality to the poem. Rhyme can also serve other functions, including linking words and associating them thematically, although Holmes does not seem to use it for these purposes.

Alliteration and Diction

Holmes carefully uses language to develop the meaning, rhythm, and structure of his poem. He uses alliteration, or the repetition of consonant sounds such as the use of *d* in □dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,□ to draw attention to the words that are alliterated and provide a pleasing or musical sound. Holmes's diction, or choice of vocabulary, is also carefully selected for various purposes; for example, it sounds somewhat antiquated (even for 1858) in order to make the poem seem more eloquent or authoritative. Finally, the poet uses diction to develop his thematic agenda, using spiritual terminology when he wishes to discuss the human soul and mythological references when he wishes to strike a fanciful or □enchanted□ note.

Historical Context

The 1850s were a period of dangerous and rising tensions in the United States, but it was also a time of great intellectual progress and a flourishing of intellectual development in cities such as Boston. In a sense, therefore, it was a decade of contradictions and debate, and the great divide in values and patriotic sentiment would cause the country to erupt in civil war in 1861. This divide was between southeastern states, which were based on a cotton- and tobacco-producing plantation system, and northeastern states, whose economy was largely industrial. Although slavery had been outlawed in the North, it was legal in the South, and slave labor remained the basis of the southern economy. Much of the debate in the 1850s was about the destiny of the large middle and western sections of the country, to which settlers were moving in great numbers. Congress decided whether new states would be slaveholding, and this designation largely determined whether they would assume Southern or Northern values.

The question of slavery, therefore, was an extremely important and divisive issue of the day, hotly debated by politicians, writers, intellectuals, and ordinary people. Holmes and other figures lectured and wrote about the possible abolition of slavery in the territories, which Holmes opposed because he feared the consequences of the building conflict between the South and the North. American intellectuals also spoke and wrote about other major issues of the day, such as women's rights (women were barred from voting and experienced severe discrimination) and new, large-scale immigration. Massive numbers of immigrants, particularly from Ireland because of the Great Famine there, settled in the United States in the 1850s.

Holmes's hometown of Boston was famous in the 1850s for its vibrant intellectual culture full of social reformers and literary figures, and historians often characterize this period as a renaissance of literature and philosophy with Boston at its hub. Influential figures, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and James Russell Lowell, lived and wrote in Boston, which was a commercially successful and rapidly expanding city at this time. Emerson was the chief proponent of transcendentalism, a post-Romantic literary and philosophical movement that stressed the unity of all things and the revelation of deep truths to be found in personal experience as well as in reason. Thoreau (an influential early environmentalist) and Fuller (who helped found the American feminist movement) also were transcendentalists, and they met in conversation circles to develop their theories and inspire each other.

Also of great importance in Boston in the 1850s were the elite members of the white male Protestant ruling class, who gathered in places like Harvard College. As a prominent member of the faculty at Harvard Medical School (although he upset the Harvard elite by speaking against its Calvinist doctrine in various public addresses), Holmes was a member of this class. He was also one of Boston's leading intellectual figures, famous for his conversational skills, and he met in conversation circles that debated issues ranging from art to science. A practicing physician and medical

researcher, Holmes was interested throughout his life in advancing medical science and promoting awareness in the public. He was instrumental in encouraging the widespread use of microscopes by physicians and in alerting the public to a contagious condition found in women during childbirth. Although he was not a transcendentalist and even spoke out against its doctrines, Holmes later came to appreciate Emerson's ideas and wrote an influential biography of the philosopher.

Critical Overview

□The Chambered Nautilus□ has been popular and critically acclaimed since its publication in Holmes's prose work *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*. It is one of Holmes's most famous poems and one of the most popular poems about a sea creature in American literature. *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, in general, was an immediate success. Rowland E. Prothero writes in the *Quarterly Review* (1895) that it is by this work that □the name of Holmes will live.□ Prothero goes on to state that □The Chambered Nautilus□ is one □of the best representatives of [Holmes's] poetic gifts.□ John Macy notes in *The Spirit of American Literature* that it is □Holmes's most ambitious poem, the one which he was most eager to have remembered as poetry.□ Macy, however, finds the poem □an elaborate conceit, pretty but not moving,□ and favors other examples of Holmes's verse.

Holmes has lost much of his prestige and readership in the twentieth century, in great part because of his old-fashioned views on issues such as slavery and women's rights. Many readers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have found the topical points in his prose and philosophical works, such as *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, quite dated. In her article □Sex, Sentiment, and Oliver Wendell Holmes,□ Gail Thain Parker argues that Holmes is a more complex thinker about gender than he may appear but nevertheless is □[eager] to believe in fundamental differences between the sexes.□ In the early twenty-first century, Holmes's poems, including □The Chambered Nautilus,□ are the most popular of his writings, although critics such as Peter Gibian continue to analyze all of Holmes's works and his place in the nineteenth-century intellectual scene.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Scott Trudell is a doctoral student of English literature at Rutgers University. In the following essay, he discusses the didactic, or moral, emphasis on productivity in The Chambered Nautilus, arguing that Holmes is ambivalent about his own moral message.

Immediately before □The Chambered Nautilus□ is recited in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, the autocrat asks, □Can you find no lesson in this?□ In this way, he emphasizes that the poem will have a didactic, or a moral or instructional, quality. It is clear from the surrounding context that the poem's □lesson□ will relate the ideas Holmes has been developing throughout the fourth chapter of his breakfast-table conversation series, which focuses on age, memory, productivity, personal development, and the spiritual journey through life's various stages. The autocrat's comments toward the end of the chapter about the □direction we are moving,□ the importance that □we outgrow all that we love,□ and the □race of life□ in which a person must make his or her imprint on the world are intended to relate to Holmes's didactic message in □The Chambered Nautilus.□

As the autocrat promises, the chambered nautilus serves as a didactic metaphor for the journey of the soul through life. The poem's speaker compares the nautilus to a ship in much the same way that the autocrat compares life's developmental progress to a sailing voyage: □To reach the port of heaven, we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it,□but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor.□ The poem reinforces this idea of personal agency when it dwells on the idea of leaving □the past year's dwelling for the new.□ For the speaker, the chambered nautilus is an ideal metaphor for the progress of the human soul through life. The nautilus achieves a kind of perpetual progress by leaving the old behind it and speeding through the race of life that the autocrat describes earlier.

The allegory in the poem is clearly Christian, guaranteeing an escape from the □silent toil□ of □low-vaulted□ and □dim dreaming□ life, with its dangerous sirens besetting the □frail tenant□ of mortality's shell. Although the nautilus, or the metaphor for the human soul, brings a □heavenly message,□ it is a □Child of the wandering sea, / Cast from her lap, forlorn!□ It must endure life's trials with humble Christian patience, creating the perfect shell of a life's work in the process. When he reaches the end of life's voyage, the subject departs from life and into spiritual freedom, leaving this □outgrown□ but beautiful shell behind as a mark of his achievement.

The poem reinforces the center of the autocrat's conversational argument and develops Holmes's idea of the noble process of development. It is not, like □Contentment□ in chapter 11 of *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, an ironic poem that playfully and purposefully undercuts the autocrat's moral message. This is not to say that the poem is an entirely straightforward or simple allegory, however. Holmes's □lesson□ dwells on a variety of preconceptions about productivity, personal development, and social mobility, and it subtly suggests potential pitfalls, dangers, and inadequacies in this worldview.

The primary preoccupation of □The Chambered Nautilus□ is an obsession with productivity and industriousness. Here and throughout *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, Holmes suggests that it is necessary to work constantly, steadfastly, and earnestly throughout one's life. The nautilus, compared to a □venturous□ ship that □Sails the unshadowed main,□ is characterized by its □silent toil□ as □year after year□ it builds its shell. The main lesson the speaker extracts from the sea creature is not to float aimlessly in a protective shell, enjoying life's □gulfs enchanted,□ but to build continuously and productively □As the swift seasons roll!□

The demanding work ethic suggested in the poem relates to the drive to increase the world's scientific, artistic, literary, and philosophical knowledge. Holmes was a prolific scientist, physician, writer, and scholar, and he was dedicated to the wide advancement of human intellectual achievement as he saw it. Well respected as an intellectual authority by his critics and friends alike, Holmes was consulted on a wide variety of matters, acquainted with nearly all of the major writers and intellectuals of his time, and continually urged to publish and speak in Boston and throughout the country. *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, like much of Holmes's work, stresses that truth is an □eternal flow□ (as it is called in the poem □What We All Think□), and it is the obligation of humankind to pursue it vigorously.

The demand for industriousness extends to Christian virtue, which is framed as a sort of natural extension of a productive and laborious life. As Holmes states in □What We All Think,□ the □one unquestioned text□ around which all human study and achievement revolves is □God is Love!□ This statement emphasizes that the pursuit of heavenly virtue is also the pursuit of scientific and philosophical truth. Holmes stresses that the pursuit of religious truth results in □All doubt beyond, all fear above□ because, to him, it is another of the noble or necessary aims of human toil. □The Chambered Nautilus□ reflects this idea in the sense that the nautilus's, or soul's, everyday toil to make its beautiful iridescent shell on earth is also its toil to build new temples, and with each larger chamber it comes closer to the □free[dom]□ of heaven.

Holmes's moral of industriousness also extends to social mobility, a version of the American dream in which work results in monetary rewards. The line □Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul□ in □The Chambered Nautilus□ suggests that productivity applies not only to the pursuit of knowledge and Christian virtue but also to the accumulation of wealth. This suggestion is somewhat curious, because □stately mansions□ are not a typical image of the humble Christian home, but the poem seems to include this kind of upward social mobility in its moral as the speaker leaves his □low-vaulted,□ presumably impoverished, past in exchange for the most stately of mansions, heaven. This idea is reinforced by the fact that the nautilus continually abandons its previous associations, which are no longer worthy of it. The autocrat develops this idea more explicitly in the paragraphs that precede the poem when he says, somewhat ironically, □So you will not think I mean to speak lightly of old friendships.□ Whether he speaks of them □lightly□ or not, the autocrat values old acquaintances not for their virtues or by any sense of loyalty but only because they allow him to measure his progress in life. The nautilus is an appropriate metaphor for this kind of thinking

because, as the speaker emphasizes, the shelled sea creature shuts its doors on its past and locks it away in compartments.

The poem's moral of constant, relentless productivity in the pursuit of knowledge, spirituality, and wealth reflects a typical outlook in its historical period. In the United States, as in Britain, the middle to late nineteenth century was a period in which many extremely prolific writers were obsessed with adding to the world's catalogue of truth and knowledge. Because of transcendentalist or post-Romantic thinking, however, the Boston renaissance did not always emphasize a logical scientific process as the ideal means by which to uncover truth. Knowledge, according to Emerson, was to be found within the human mind, and personal insight was the chief tool for uncovering what he and other transcendentalists considered the innate and universal truth of the world. It would be a mistake to imagine that Holmes entirely subscribed to logic and science over personal insight, although Holmes was often known to criticize the central tenets of transcendentalism.

Whether or not it can be said to include transcendentalist ideas, □The Chambered Nautilus□ reveals significant ambivalence about its moral that a person is obligated to work industriously, ceaselessly, and rigorously year after year. The best example of Holmes's mixed feelings about a straightforward, logical, and productive work ethic is the fact that the nautilus is so dour as it labors endlessly in its chambers. A □frail□ and □forlorn□ creature confined to a □cell□ or □crypt,□ the nautilus is continually displaced from its origins in a kind of tragic, circular toil. It is not allowed to dwell in the □gulfs enchanted□ because of the alluring but deadly sirens, but it ends up wrecked on the rocks anyway. The nautilus must steal away with □soft step□ as though to avoid the old friends and acquaintances it has left behind in its vigorous drive to produce. Because its final product is a beautiful but cracked-open shell, the □note□ from its □dead lips□ is not necessarily as clear a □heavenly message□ as the speaker claims.

The speaker is certainly not aware of grim ambivalence in the portrayal of industriousness, but Holmes seems to be considering it sincerely. Ceaseless and unhappy toil may be a kind of necessary result of productivity, as it is portrayed in the poem, and the beauty of the nautilus's broken shell is, in part, a kind of signal that the labor was worthwhile. Holmes implies at the same time, however, that this tragically broken shell is a warning that the nautilus has pushed itself too hard and for rewards that it never enjoys. Although it develops a moral that urges the reader to engage in the laborious process of intellectual, religious, and financial productivity, □The Chambered Nautilus□ leaves a strong hint of tragedy and resignation in the creature or person that follows this advice.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on □The Chambered Nautilus,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Research the characteristics of the chambered nautilus and give a class presentation about its biological and environmental significance. How does the species survive? What is its place in evolution? How and why does it build its shell in a logarithmic spiral? What was its status and contact with humans in the mid-nineteenth century, and what is its status today? Does Holmes's poem accurately portray the biological characteristics of the nautilus? Why or why not?

Holmes was renowned for his conversational skills. Read *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* and use it as an inspiration for leading a class discussion about philosophical, scientific, artistic, and other issues. You do not need to focus on the themes of the book, and you can include issues that are pertinent and topical to you and your classmates, but make sure that you address the universal and philosophical significance of these issues. Make an effort, like the autocrat, to discomfort and even shock your classmates in order to stir debate and conversation.

Write a poem that uses an animal or sea creature as a metaphor for a person or some kind of human endeavor. Try to tailor your description of the animal to emphasize the particular qualities of the person or endeavor that are the object of the metaphor, and try to use the technique of personification. For example, if you were using a particular dog to represent a vicious person or quality, you could dwell on the color and the points of its teeth that are in perfect order because it had braces when it was young.

Research the cultural climate of mid-nineteenth-century Boston and write an essay discussing its intellectual atmosphere. What were the major factions or groups of thinkers, and how were they important and influential? Describe the key philosophical debates of the period. What was the significance of the Boston renaissance to the rest of the country? Describe some of the factors that sparked this movement and how it came to an end. What writings of the period have endured, and why have they endured?

Compare and Contrast

1850s: The United States is an increasingly divided country. Tensions flare between Southerners and Northerners, and two presidents fail to ease the conflict over slavery and ideology that is building steadily toward civil war.

Today: The United States appears to be a divided country once again. Republicans and Democrats have deep ideological differences, and the administration of President George W. Bush is known for rewarding its ultraconservative base and refusing to take a moderate stance.

1850s: Boston is the literary and intellectual hub of the United States, boasting the greatest thinkers and scholars of the American Renaissance.

Today: Although Boston remains a center of American intellectual life, home to many of the best universities in the country, New York is a larger hub of literary and philosophical thought.

1850s: In the United States, slavery is legal in Southern states, African Americans throughout the country are impoverished and segregated from white society, women cannot vote, and discrimination against immigrants is widespread.

Today: The United States guarantees equal rights for all adult citizens under the law, but discrimination against minorities continues to exist.

What Do I Read Next?

Holmes's "Old Ironsides" (1830), available in books of his collected poetry, such as *The Poetical Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (1975), is a famous poem about the USS *Constitution*, a Revolutionary War ship that was scheduled to be dismantled. Because of the emotion that Holmes's poem stirred in the general public, the ship was preserved.

Woman in the Nineteenth Century (published in 1845 and reprinted in 1999), by Margaret Fuller, is a striking, impassioned, and important prose work of feminism that criticizes male hypocrisy and discrimination against women and proposes a variety of solutions to improving women's rights.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is about a child born outside wedlock in mid-seventeenth-century Boston and the cruel response to the mother by the rigidly Puritan community.

Phillis Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (ca. 1767) uses Christianity to compel whites to have compassion for the former and current black slaves in the United States.

"The City in the Sea," by Edgar Allan Poe (1831), is a mysterious poem about a doomed underwater city. It is based on a Bible story from the book of Genesis.

Further Study

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Nature and Selected Essays*, Penguin, 2003, originally published by J. Munroe and Company, 1836.

Emerson's first and most influential work on the post-Romantic philosophy of transcendentalism, *Nature* is a crucial work in the historical context of mid-nineteenth-century Boston.

Gibian, Peter, *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

In this important book about Holmes's place in American history, Gibian provides a literary and historical analysis of Holmes and his intellectual circle.

Hawthorne, Hildegarde, *The Happy Autocrat: A Life of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, Longmans, Green, 1938.

Hawthorne's biography of Holmes sketches the historical context surrounding □The Chambered Nautilus□ and provides a useful overview of the poet's life and career.

Traister, Bryce, □Sentimental Medicine: Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Construction of Masculinity,□ in *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Autumn 1999, pp. 203-25.

Although it does not discuss □The Chambered Nautilus,□ Traister's article provides an interesting commentary about Holmes's views on gender relations, particularly his idea of male medical authority and its approach to women.

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Holmes, Oliver Wendell, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1960, pp. 88-90, 92.

□□□, □The Chambered Nautilus,□ in *The Poetical Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975, pp. 149-50, 152.

Macy, John, □Holmes,□ in *The Spirit of American Literature*, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913, pp. 155-70.

Parker, Gail Thain, □Sex, Sentiment, and Oliver Wendell Holmes,□ in *Women's Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1972, p. 49.

Prothero, Rowland E., □A Review of *The Writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes*,□ in *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 179, No. 359, January 1895, pp. 189-206.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535