The City Limits Study Guide

The City Limits by Archie Randolph Ammons

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Contents

The City Limits Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Poem Text....5

Plot Summary....6

Themes....9

Style....11

Historical Context....12

Critical Overview....14

Criticism....15

Critical Essay #1....16

Critical Essay #2....19

Critical Essay #3....23

Critical Essay #4....28

Adaptations....31

Topics for Further Study....32

Compare and Contrast....33

What Do I Read Next?....34

Further Study....35

Bibliography....36

Copyright Information....37

Introduction

Like much of A. R. Ammons's poetry, "The City Limits" explores the uneasy relationship between modern civilization and the natural world. The images that Ammons uses in this poem, such as his consideration of the sound of "birds' bones" or of the "glow-blue" of the bodies of flies, make readers aware of the subtle things in the natural world that ordinarily would go unnoticed. He also draws readers' attention to dark, fearsome, and unpleasant aspects of the world around them, such as the "guts of natural slaughter" that flies feed on and the "dark work of the deepest cells," an allusion to cancer. It is typical of Ammons's poetry that he is able to show the duality of the way that humans view nature. After making his readers uncomfortable, Ammons ends by making a convincing case that understanding can make fear of nature "calmly turn to praise."

This poem was first published in 1971, when Ammons's reputation as a major American poet was already established. It is available in his *Collected Poems, 1951-1971*. For the following thirty years, before his death in 2001, Ammons continued to be an innovator, changing styles and producing a varied legacy of poems ranging from book-length to just a few lines long. Throughout the last half of the twentieth century, he was considered to be a central figure among the growing number of poets who embrace the spiritual aspects of science and nature.

Author Biography

Archie Randolph Ammons was born on February 18, 1926, at his parents' farmhouse near Whiteville, North Carolina. His childhood was spent with his parents and two older sisters on the family's tobacco farm, which his grandfather had built. It was during these formative years that he developed the understanding of nature and appreciation of its complexity that is evident in almost all of his poems. After graduating from Whiteville High School in 1943, he went to work in the navy shipyard at Wilmington, North Carolina. He enrolled in the Navy in 1944 and did a tour of duty in the South Pacific during the end of World War II. While in the Navy, during the long night watches, Ammons began to write poetry.

When the war was over, Ammons took advantage of the G. I. Bill, a law that subsidized college tuition for veterans. He attended Wake Forest University, changing his major often between pre-medicine, biology, chemistry, and general science. In 1949, he graduated with a bachelor of science degree, and soon after he was married. After a few years of graduate school at the University of California at Berkley, he went to work for a small company in southern New Jersey that made glass products for laboratories. He was there for twelve years, during which time his first two poetry collections were published. At a poetry reading at Cornell University, he discussed the idea of teaching with another faculty member. The next year he was hired, the start of a long-term relationship between Ammons and Cornell that was to last for the rest of his life.

Ammons has won the National Book Award twice, first for *Collected Poems, 1951-1971* (1972) and second for the book-length poem *Garbage* (1993). In 1993, the Poetry Society awarded Ammons the Robert Frost Medal in recognition of his life's work. "The City Limits" can be found in *Briefings: Poems Small and Easy* (1971), in which it was first published, and in *Collected Poems, 1951-1971*. Ammons died in Ithaca, New York, on February 25, 2001, at the age of seventy-five.

Poem Text

When you consider the radiance, that it does not
withhold
itself but pours its abundance without selection into
every
nook and cranny not overhung or hidden; when
you consider
that birds' bones make no awful noise against the
light but
lie low in the light as in a high testimony; when
you consider
the radiance, that it will look into the guiltiest
swervings of the weaving heart and bear itself upon
them,
not flinching into disguise or darkening; when you
consider
the abundance of such resource as illuminates the
glow-blue
bodies and gold-skeined wings of flies swarming
the dumped
guts of a natural slaughter or the coil of shit and in
no
way winces from its storms of generosity; when
you consider
that air or vacuum, snow or shale, squid or wolf,
rose or lichen,
each is accepted into as much light as it will take,
then
the heart moves roomier, the man stands and looks
about, the
leaf does not increase itself above the grass, and
the dark
work of the deepest cells is of a tune with May
bushes
and fear lit by the breadth of such calmly turns to
praise.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-3

The first stanza of "The City Limits" does not consist of just one unit of language: it starts with a conjunctive phrase, "When you consider," and finishes that idea in the middle of line 3, starting another phrase, again with the words "when you consider," before the stanza's end. By compiling one incomplete thought upon another before coming out with the main grammatical point, the poem goads readers to guess what they are supposed to find out in the end after they have considered all of the things being listed.

In this first stanza, readers are told that the poem's point will come out after they have considered a phenomenon that is defined as "the radiance." Radiance can be used to refer to light, and it can also sometimes refer to heat. It is first clearly identified as light in line 3, which says that the radiance is excluded from areas that are "overhung or hidden." Since the radiance is blocked out by overhangs, readers can assume that it comes from above, like sunlight.

Lines 4-6

The second phrase submitted for readers' consideration has been introduced in line 3, but it is fully realized in lines 4 through 5. Here, the poem brings up the image of "birds' bones." It mixes sensory images by bringing up the sound of the bones in line 4 and considers how that sound exists within the visual realm of light. The understatement "no awful noise" seems to imply that the beating of birds' wings does make a sound, and that it is in fact unpleasant, but that it just does not reach the level of "awful." This is just one way in which the poem shows an acceptance of the harshness of nature. In line 5, there is a contrast drawn between the heights that birds could reach in flight and the fact that they spend their time in the sun low near the earth.

The end of this stanza repeats the phrase that started the poem, "When you consider the radiance." It changes direction after that one introductory phrase, though. Instead of going on to identify the radiance, as it did in the first line, line 6 brings up a moral judgement, guilt. Ending with the phrase "the guiltiest" draws attention to the concept of guilt, and it calls on readers' curiosity to find out what guilty thing or things this radiance is examining.

Lines 7-9

In saying that the "radiance" that shines from above can look into the heart, this poem plays with the idea of mixed metaphors. Before this stanza, the radiance has been used to mean the sun; the heart, however, is not exposed to sunshine. Therefore, readers are forced to recognize a more abstract meaning to the idea of radiance, to know it as

something that has access to human emotions, which are, symbolically at least, held within "the weaving heart." This understanding of human emotions is not the most important thing for the natural world's radiance; the poem goes on, past the complexity of the human heart to the complexity of a fly.

In line 9, the fly is described but not identified. Readers are introduced to positive elements, such as abundance, illumination, and the cool image of an object glowing blue. Coming after the human heart, these respectful descriptions seem to indicate something that has superior significance, a worldly object that deserves even more consideration than the labyrinth of human emotion.

Lines 10-12

The break between the third and fourth stanzas serves to make the glowing blue object that has yet to be defined seem even more mysterious to readers. The fourth stanza begins by building this object up even further, saying that it has "goldskeined wings." The word "skein" is usually used to refer to a coil of thread, indicating the fineness and fragility of a fly's wings, while the emphasis on their gold color makes the fly sound extremely valuable. This impression is contradicted, of course, when the poem finally gets around to letting readers know that it is a fly being described. The reversal of expectation becomes even clearer in line 11, when the poem contrasts the positive aspects of the fly with its filthy actions, such as swarming onto the guts of dead animals or onto excrement. While the poem does introduce these gruesome aspects of the fly's life, it generally approves of the fly because, as it points out in line 12, the fly seems to appreciate the things that are made available to it. The poem does show, in stanza 3, that humans have a place in the greater scheme of nature, but it shows in stanza 4 that even the simple functions of a lowly fly are as important as the emotions that some humans find allimportant.

Lines 13-15

In this stanza, the contrasts that have been alluded to before are presented in a quick list, which pairs opposites together to show that the natural world has room for much diversity. Air is paired with vacuum, which is defined as the absence of air; snow, which is a light, floating object, is paired with shale, which is a dark, heavy rock; soft oceanic squids are coupled with sharp, mountain-dwelling wolves; beautiful and delicate roses are contrasted with an unstoppable and unnoticed moss, lichen. Line 14 finally gets to the poem's overall point: that the light of the sun, its radiance, shines down upon all things evenly, with no favoritism from the sun. This main idea of universal equality marks the end of the list of phrases that each starts "when you consider," and the poem's language finally moves past that repetitive language and, in line 14, completes the phrases that begin with "when," moving on to what happens "then."

What happens after all of the considering, according to the poem, is the acceptance of the situations Ammons describes here makes a human a better person. As before, the

poem uses the idea of the "heart" in line 15 to stand for all human emotion: saying that it "moves roomier" shows an acknowledgement that human potential is less limited once one accepts the varieties of nature.

Lines 16-18

In stanza 6, the poem offers three ways in which nature collects its contradictory elements in order to create something more grand than humans expect from it. The phrase "the / leaf does not increase itself above the grass," in line 16, has symbolic implications: leaves naturally grow toward the sun and, of course, blot out the sun for the grass below, but they do not "increase themselves," which may be read as the idea that they do not destroy the grass for the sake of their own ego. In line 17, Ammons hints at nature at its worst with the idea of "dark works" within "the deepest cells"; he pairs this frightening mystery, however, with the simple and obvious beauty of a bush growing in the springtime. In the last line, the poem shows the ultimate benefit of this new way of viewing things that it proposes: by seeing all things in their proper perspective in nature, fear of nature's immensity turns to praise of its complex system, where everything has its place.

Themes

Paradox

This poem centers much of its argument around the fact that nature has room to hold seemingly paradoxical situations at the same time. It starts out by pointing out things that do not seem to fit easily together, such as the solidity of birds' bones when contrasted with the insubstantial nature of sunlight, or the secrets of the human heart co-existing with the physical world at large. At about the middle of the poem, though, the poem becomes more clearly focused on the opposites found in nature. The fly is examined in two ways, first as a thing of beauty and then as a lowly scavenger that feeds thankfully on others' waste. Once that specific paradox has been introduced, the poem unleashes a list of paired items that illustrate the contrasts found in nature: air and vacuum, snow and shale, squids and wolves, roses and lichen. In acknowledging that the world is able to contain such seemingly contradictory situations, "The City Limits" seeks to break down the limits of human thought: the "breadth of such" referred to in line 18 opens the door for more possibility than humans generally recognize.

Acceptance and Belonging

This poem operates within a commonly-held notion that human emotions are categorically dif- ferent than things found in nature. Here, the scope of nature is represented as "the radiance," an image that is primarily based on light but that also implies the sort of unseen glow, like radiation, that can permeate anything. The extremes of human emotion are represented in the poem as "the guiltiest swervings of the weaving heart." Many philosophical systems, particularly in Western civilization, separate humanity from nature, recognizing contact between them but not identifying them as part of the same overall system.

In the end, the poem suggests that seeing how humanity belongs to nature will allow people to transform their fear of the world into praise for it. This is not a case of the larger entity, nature, allowing the smaller, humanity, into its limited terrain but of humans admitting that they belong to the same system as everything else. Using the phrase "when you consider" five times in the first four stanzas emphasizes the fact that humanity's acceptance into the world at large is a matter of human thought being readjusted, allowing the poem's readers to see, or consider, how much people are involved in the same physical processes that rule all other things in the universe.

Fear

In "The City Limits," fear is said to stem from the "breadth" of the physical world. In a sense, human fear seems to stem from the knowledge that humanity is outnumbered in the world. It is humans who have made up the idea that there is a difference between nature and humanity; when a poem like this one points out that all of the things in

nature, down to the "dark work of the deepest cells," are "of a tune" with each other, then the prospect of being left outside of that majority can indeed be very intimidating. The cure for such fear offered in the poem is to view the wholeness of nature as acceptance, not opposition. Light is offered to all things, including humans, and accepted by them. The element of competition is removed. The poem predicts that considering nature this way will change fear into praise, as humans see that they are not outside of the natural system but part of it.

Self-Discovery

A key moment in this poem comes in the fifth stanza, with the revelation of what all of the aforementioned considering will lead to. "The heart moves roomier," Ammons explains, and "the man stands and looks about." The implication is that the man has previously been narrow and unaware of his surroundings, but that examining nature beyond oneself leads one to discover what one really is. Disgust at the fly's habits or fear of the unknown "dark" parts of the world are all considered part of the process of self-discovery in this poem, with humans coming to know who they really are, not through self-centered concentration, but through examination of the world beyond them.

Style

Sprung Rhythm

"The City Limits" uses a poetic form called Sprung Rhythm. This form requires only that the same number of stressed syllables occurs on each line of the poem. The unstressed syllables are not counted, and can vary from line to line. The effect that this creates is one of simultaneous order, because of the consistency in accented syllables, and disorder, because of the variable number of overall syllables per line. In this case, the duality between order and disorder in the poem's form mirrors its message about the irrational and rational aspects of the universe coexisting as one.

Each line of "The City Limits" has eight stressed syllables. One-syllable words are sometimes accented, sometimes not; two-syllable words will usually have just one accented syllable; and words with more than two syllables will often have a second syllable that is stressed, though to a lesser degree than the primary accent. Therefore, the first line reads, "*When* you con-*si*-der the *ra*-di-*ance*, *that* it *does not* with-*hold*." Line fifteen could be scanned as such: "the *heart moves roo*-mier, the *man stands and looks* a-*bout*, the. . . ." This sort of consistency is understated and seldom noticed, but readers tend to feel its effect whether they know it or not.

Refrain

Ammons uses the phrase "when you consider" as a refrain. It appears often throughout this poem, reminding readers that they are being presented with a subject that they might not have thought about before, or at least have probably given too little consideration. Repeating a refrain often works in poetry in the same way that it does in music: regardless of the actual words being repeated, the very act of repetition gives readers a sense of the author's control, reminding them of the fact that somebody has arranged the thoughts being presented. In "The City Limits," this refrain establishes a voice for the poem's speaker. It is a gentle and thoughtful voice, one that is not about to rush readers to see things a particular way but is instead offering them suggestions.

Historical Context

There is no specific moment marking an actual beginning to America's awareness of the delicate balance between nature and society, but there is also no doubt that the environmental movement came to national importance in the 1970s. That was when the general population became conscious of two intertwined ideas: human dependence on nonrenewable resources, and the environment's inability to absorb the pollutants that were discarded into it.

Environmental awareness had appeared in intellectual works throughout the country's history, most notably in the writings of Henry David Thoreau, whose 1845 book *Walden* documented his attempt to live naturally in the woods, simplifying his life by freeing himself of the trappings of society. In the following century, small movements sprung up, mostly over local causes, protesting specific abuses of the environment. The world's first protected National Park, Yellowstone, was set aside by Congressional fiat in 1972; the Audubon Society, a collection of bird enthusiasts, was first formed in 1885 to oppose unregulated hunting; the Sierra Club was formed in 1892. Overall, however, as America expanded westward toward the Pacific coast in the nineteenth century and grew to economic and military dominance throughout the First and Second World Wars, there was not much sense of urgency about the natural limits on society.

One of the greatest influences on the environmental movement was the publication, in 1962, of *Silent Spring*, by zoologist Rachel Carson. Focusing on the effects of pesticides and insecticides on songbirds, Carson's book provided a clear overview of humanity's place in the ecosystem. It was widely successful, and to this day is considered one of the definitive texts about ecology. Decades later, *Time* magazine named Carson one of the 100 most influential women of the twentieth century.

The 1960s marked a turbulent and difficult time for America. Lingering resentments over racial segregation in the South drew attention to the fact that those who held economic and political power could not always be trusted to care for the well being of everybody. The military superiority that had impressed the world during the century's two Great Wars proved to be fallible when tangled up in the jungles of the tiny country of Vietnam. Questions about those in authority went hand in hand with a spiritual love for the splendors of the earth, which society was debasing. The country's young people, particularly college students, learned how to organize political opposition from their involvement in the Civil Rights movement and antiwar protest groups.

Throughout the 1960s, public awareness of environmental issues was raised. Air and water pollution were recognized as health threats. The United States government established the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970, to coordinate efforts to contain pollution. Bills that favored clean air, clean water, and protection of endangered species were introduced into Congress by the end of the sixties. March 21, 1970, marked the first Earth Day, a holiday promoted by a coalition of concerned environmental groups in order to raise global awareness of the environment. An estimated 20 million people across the world participated in demonstrations and events

to mark the occasion. This event is celebrated every year, keeping environmental awareness at the forefront of public consciousness.

Critical Overview

"The City Limits" is one of A. R. Ammons's most famous poems. It came at the time in Ammons's life when he was first enjoying wide critical praise. The book that it first appeared in, *Briefings: Poems Small and Easy*, is considered one of his best, showing off his vast intellectual understanding of the natural world and his sharp poetic sensibilities. It was then included in *Collected Poems, 1951- 1971*, which reached a wide audience after winning the National Book Award. Geoffrey Hartman announces at the beginning of his review of the book for the *New York Times Book Review* that "with these *Collected Poems* a lag in reputation is overcome. A. R. Ammons's 400 pages of poetry, written over the space of a generation, manifest an energy, wit and an amazing *compounding* of mind with nature that cannot be overlooked." "The City Limits" is one of Ammons's most frequently reprinted poems.

One of the poem's most strident admirers is the literary critic Harold Bloom. In his introduction to a book of essays about Ammons, Bloom refers to the poet as "the central poet of my generation." Foremost among the works that Bloom admires Ammons for is "The City Limits," which he considers an "extraordinary poem." For him, this one poem marks a mastery of style, with Ammons showing an ability to disappear as a speaker, to let the poem's imagery speak for itself. The poet Robert Pinsky, on the other hand, questions the philosophy that the poem espouses. His essay on Ammons, from his book *The Situation of Poetry*, points out that "[i]f fear ever turns 'calmly' to anything, being 'of a tune with May bushes' is a lamely rhetorical motive for such turning. . . . Moreover, it is the 'breadth of the natural world, and its radiance, which kindle such fear." In other words, Pinsky finds the poem self-contradictory, calling it "romantically affirmative" but "less convincing" than other of Ammons works.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is a creative writing and literature instructor at two colleges in Illinois. In this essay, Kelly considers whether the "radiance" referred to in the poem is as comforting as Ammons wants it to be.

A. R. Ammons's reputation grew over the course of the nearly fifty years that he was publishing poetry, mostly because of two key elements. The first was his elasticity and curiosity as an artist: he went through phases but never settled on any one style as being the "right" one, choosing instead to constantly experiment. He was versatile enough to produce a four-line poem or a poem like *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (written on a roll of adding machine tape, three inches by one hundred feet), displaying equal craft in each. The second aspect that Ammons is remembered for is his drive to define with his poetry that meeting place between humanity and nature. He is generally considered to be a modern master of the nature poem, although opinions do vary: most critics recognize his work as the successor of the Emersonian tradition of Transcendentalism, the first and possibly strongest strain of philosophy produced in America, but a few see in Ammons's work little more insight into the natural world than one could glean from a subscription to a science magazine.

Ammons's poem "The City Limits" is a showcase for only the latter of these tendencies. It is structurally sound but has nothing remarkable about its style that would make a reader aware of his skill with different forms. The most interesting thing about it is the way that it approaches theology. It makes suppositions about the natural world and presents an inconsistency in traditional human understanding, which it ends up apparently settling. It is only after some examination that it becomes clear that the poem actually has less to say than one might first assume.

It would be hard to deny that what the poem refers to as "radiance" is something like what people in the Judeo-Christian tradition usually mean when they talk about God. Like God, this radiance is omniscient: it is described in the first stanza as being like sunlight, kept out of areas that are "overhung or hidden," but by the second and third stanzas it is credited with the ability to reach beyond the limits of the physical world, to "look into the guiltiest / swervings of the weaving heart and bear itself upon them." When Ammons presents this light as a unifying force, a constant that runs throughout the universe, it is difficult to not think that he means it to fill the function of God.

Like many images of God, the radiance is considered to have benevolent intentions: it brings warmth and light to all things of the Earth, uniting them as soon as they have been touched by it. This touch is not forced upon them, as "each is accepted into as much light as it will take." Still, even without working at it, the radiance is, by its very existence, able to calm strife. Because they have both been touched by this light, things that may seem completely unrelated to one another are, as the poem puts it in the last stanza, "of a tune" with each other. This is, at least, what the poem claims.

Contemporary readers certainly respond better to a passive, non-judgmental, accepting sort of radiance than they do to a God who can be pleased or displeased. God is generally thought to have a will, which the radiance apparently lacks. In this respect, "The City Limits" replaces old-fashioned moral judgements with amorality. It presents a world where all, in the judgement of the radiant sunshine, is equally good and acceptable. While God finds certain behaviors displeasing, the radiance does not, as the poem puts it, "withhold" itself. It is active only in the sense that it goes to all things and offers itself to them, but it does so with no particular agenda to promote, no desire to make things any different than they are currently. This radiance goes everywhere and deals with all things equally, with no distinction for "good" or "bad."

Within the poem, opposites are brought together by being touched by the same radiant light from above. That much is easy to understand and accept. The poem complicates the matter, though, with its reference to the "city" in its title, which pointedly raises a distinction between nature and humanity. There is no further mention of "city" after the title, leaving readers little to go on when they try to guess what Ammons meant the city to represent, or why he mentioned it in a place of such significance as the title if it was not his intention to focus on that idea.

It is fairly routine in poetry about nature to use the city to remind readers of nature's opposite, which is the man-made world, built from ideas that nature apparently never intended. This is the world that humans (including, of course, poets) are familiar with, one which some humans consider an accomplishment, to be looked upon with pride. Ammons gives the impression here that the city is simply not a good enough way for people to expe- rience the world, which he defines here by its limits. He contrasts the city, with its limitations, to the limitless reach of radiant light.

It would be oversimplifying, almost to an insulting degree, to think that Ammons wrote this poem to show his readers how much smaller the creations of humanity are when compared to the vastness of the universe in general. Clearly, humanity is just one part of the whole of existence. Ammons may aim to remind his readers to keep their egos in check, but there is nothing new about the idea, nothing so complex that it would require an entire poem about it. When "nature" is taken to mean all things, seen and unseen, known and unknown, then it almost goes without saying that humans and their cities are limited.

In "The City Limits," there is a reference to the fear that comes to people when they see how wide the natural world is and how limited the protection they can hope for when they gather in cities with others. The poem offers examples of things that humans try to avoid, to block out of their lives, including the aforementioned guilt; the "dumped / guts of a natural slaughter"; the excrement that flies feed on; and, by the slightest hint, the vacuum, shale, wolf, and lichen that are either considered unpleasant or just overlooked in civilized life. When these are combined with less threatening elements, such as "gold-skeined wings" and air, snow, squid, roses, and finally May bushes, the natural world is recognized to have an honest completeness that people in cities are denied. The poem proposes that humans could, if they accepted all of this variety with the same impartiality that sunlight has, make fear go away.

Is this possible, or even desirable? In the less significant examples, accepting the unpleasant but necessary aspects of life does indeed make sense: turning away from the fly or the wolf's natural tendencies, or burying guilt deep within one's heart, actually does prove to be a senseless denial of reality. But this poem actually goes so far as to name cancer ("the dark work of the deepest cells") one of the things that should be praised, not feared, simply because it exists under the same sun as May bushes. Perhaps there are some things in the natural world that should be rejected. Perhaps human experience should be limited.

The problem with replacing God with radiance is that radiance, though it sounds pleasant enough, explains nothing. This might be one of the poem's points: traditional views of what God is always end up creating systems of values that eventually force people to reject some very real experiences. But taking an accepting attitude toward all things is not really the strong philosophical stance that it might at first seem to be. The poem's position that all is right just because the positive and negative coexist, or because they both accept the radiance, can be comforting, disturbing, or just ridiculous, depending on how the pieces of experience relate to each other. This is the one thing that Ammons does not address. Readers are not told about any grand scheme, such as a religious system might devise. They are only told that they should not fear because the more threatening things are "of a tune" with those that they find comforting.

There is no real answer to the question of what "of a tune" means. If, as the phrase implies, the varieties of experience are all in one large system, working together like notes in a musical chord, then there would actually be room in that tune for things, like cancer, that would not lead one to abandon fear for admiration. If the phrase means that everything should be considered harmonious exactly because it exists, then what does the sun's radiance do to explain this? "Of a tune" asserts a positive feeling in order to tell readers to feel positive, but it does not really give any reason for them to do so.

In some ways, it is more disappointing to see through the grand statements of an uplifting poem and find them hollow than it is to read a poem that never tries to give a positive message. The overall point of "The City Limits" is that humans should be open to the natural world, not fear it. That is a message that we would all like to believe, but the poem does not really prove its point: it only makes it with language that makes us want to believe it. We would all like to believe that having the sun shine on us protects us, but the only way to do that is to ignore the natural things that we need protection from.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "The City Limits," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

White is a Seattle-based publisher, editor, and teacher. In this essay, White examines the Old Testament influences on Ammons's poem and argues its status as an ars poetica*.*

"The City Limits" is one of A. R. Ammons's most highly praised and discussed poems. First appearing in his 1971 collection, *Briefings*, and then again two years later in his National Book Award-winning *Collected Poems: 1951-1971*, the poem earned the immediate respect and awe of many, including critic Harold Bloom, who, in the introduction to his *Modern Critical Views of A. R. Ammons*, called it "extraordinary." Poet Richard Howard who, in his review of Ammons entitled "The Spent Seer Consigns Order to the Vehicle of Change," wrote that it was the "greatest poem" of *Briefings*.

While there is general agreement that the poem addresses significant religious and spiritual themes, there has been less agreement as to the particulars of the poem's meaning. Bloom points to Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalist (one who believes that there is a unified soul in man and nature and that God is immanent in both) influence in the poem, while others interpret it more overtly on the basis of either its Eastern or Christian religious overtones. Because of the overlap of transcendentalism with both Eastern and Christian beliefs, none of these views are necessarily mutually exclusive. However, few critics have commented on the poem's Biblical Old Testament influence. Additionally, there has been surprisingly little discussion as to what extent the poem can be considered an *ars poetica*: in other words, how much of "The City Limits" is Ammons's own statement about the creation and art of poetry? Although these ideas may seem at first to be unrelated, they both find a connection in the notion of "creation," and an exploration of that shared thread may shed some unexpected light on what is one of Ammons's finest poems.

That "The City Limits" has religious or spiritual overtones becomes readily evident after a cursory reading of the poem. Words like "radiance," "abundance," "testimony," and "praise" collectively connote a transcendent tone often found in religious and spiritual works. That the phrase "fear . . . calmly turns to praise" closes off the poem only enhances this reading. Reading the poem aloud for its rhythms gives one the feeling of a song of praise or of a sermon being read from a church or temple pulpit.

The structure of "The City Limits," with the rhythm that the poem's punctuation and line lengths demand, along with its repetition, is based on the form of a litany, a liturgical prayer with a series of repetitions.

One of Ammons's trademark characteristics was his extensive use of colons and semicolons in his work; it is a rare Ammons poem that employs more than a few periods. His 200-page *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, for instance, does not have a single period, and *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*, a work of 1,800 lines, concludes with a period but otherwise uses colons and semicolons exclusively. Whereas a period forces the reader to come to a full stop in both his or her reading and thought process,

commas, colons, and semicolons force pauses of varying lengths and indicate to the reader that what precedes the punctuation mark is directly related to what follows. True to Ammons's form, the only period in "The City Limits" is at the end. This use of punctuation both speeds the poem's rhythm and ties its various ideas together.

A poem's rhythm and speed are not only dictated by punctuation. Other elements, such as the stanza and line lengths, also come into play. The single sentence that makes up "The City Limits" is broken into six unrhymed tercets (a three-line stanza), each made up of lines between thirteen and seventeen syllables. Although the stanza and line breaks each give the reading a slight pause, the long lines, like the punctuation, give the poem a more prose-like, less interrupted reading. Much like a preacher whose sermon flows from one thought to the next, Ammons wants the reader of this poem to move unabated, from the "radiance" of the first line to the "praise" of the last, pausing only slightly in between and never fully stopping.

The most telling formal conceit that recalls a litany is the poem's parallel structure. "The City Limits" comprises five "when you consider" clauses that culminate in a "then" conclusion. This use of parallelism□in this case, the repetitive use of the "when" clause□is a common rhetorical device in poetry. Walt Whitman used the technique extensively, and it is employed widely by Christian preachers, perhaps most famously by those inspired by the southern Baptist tradition. Parallelism is also a common technique found in traditional Hebrew poetry and is also found extensively throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament.

Ammons was, in fact, raised in the South by a Methodist mother and a Baptist father. The sermons that he recalls attending as a child, which he referred to in an interview with Cynthia Haythe as "religious saturation," profoundly impacted him. Although not widely considered a Christian poet, Ammons wrote several poems in his career that are explicit in their Christian themes, for example, "Hymn" and "Christmas Eve." The word "radiance," with its quality of light and a connotation of having a celestial origin, is closely tied both to the Christian tradition with Jesus (He says, "I am the light of the world" in The Gospel of John, 8:12) and with the process of enlightenment in many Eastern traditions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism. "The City Limits," with a "radiance . . . [that] does not withhold / itself but pours its abundance without selection," describes a light that is offered without prejudice and is accepted by all who are willing to receive it□ "into every / nook and cranny not overhung or hidden"□ and as such can certainly be thought of in either a Christian or an Eastern context.

The poem is also deeply tied to the Old Testament tradition, a reading that is closely tied to the interpretation that it can also be read as an *ars poetica* for Ammons.

As previously mentioned, the poem's rhetorical structure can be found extensively throughout the Bible's Old Testament, but the poem is linked to the Old Testament in other ways as well. "The City Limits" recalls the first book of the Bible, Genesis, in the way that it lists the wide range of elements and creatures in the process of being created to populate the world. Ammons's list□"air or vacuum, snow or shale, squid or wolf, rose or lichen"□is no less representative of nature's, or God's, elements than the

Bible's waters, earth, vegetation, fish, birds, and "living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth." Like the creations of Genesis, which exist equally beneath the light God has created, Ammons's creations receive "the radiance" uniformly.

Another Old Testament element of this poem is some of its tonal characteristics. Despite much of its radiant feel, one cannot ignore the death-evoking "birds' bones" or "dumped guts of natural slaughter." These tones are those of the retributive God who turned disbelievers into pillars of salt and beset plagues upon the earth; these are not the New Testament tones of the all-forgiving father of Jesus.

Just as the God of the Old Testament worked with a forceful hand, so too is there a profound "weight" to the work that the "radiance" is performing here. In the first stanza, the light characteristically "pours its abundance" onto the world, but, in the second and third stanzas, that same light "look[s] into the guiltiest / swervings of the weaving heart" and "bear[s] itself upon them." By the fourth stanza, it is offering up "storms of generosity." This is not a "forgiving" light; this is a light that recognizes how humans contrive to manage their guilty affairs, and this is a light that "bear[s]" down and exerts pressure upon them. This is a light with profound weight and influence, a light that "storms" as well as "pours." With the connotations of death and violence, the poem is deep in the realm of the Old Testament. There is no hint of the New Testament themes of resurrection or immortality here: the bird has died and turned to bones, and flies feed off the remains of natural violence.

How does this Biblical reading fit into the idea that this poem can be read as an *ars poetica*? To begin with, Ammons was well known for addressing the art of poetry in his poems; many of his poems address his poetic theories. So much so, in fact, that critic Stephen Cushman calls *ars poetica* Ammons's "characteristic mode."

Taken on one literal level, "The City Limits" can be read as a "nature poem." As the title sug- gests, the setting is at the city limits, among the flora and fauna of the rural world. Ammons is simply listing what can be discovered in nature and how such a discovery can change a man, force his heart to move "roomier" and his "fear . . . [to turn] to praise."

If one reads the "limits" of the title as a verb, then the meaning is altered significantly. In this light, the title suggests that the city is "limiting," or that it "limits." What does the city limit? Spiritual growth and understanding, perhaps, or perhaps the poetic imagination.

There is no question that nature, and not civilization, fueled Ammons's writing; society as such seldom entered his poems. When they are not explicitly addressing his own poetic theories, Ammons's poems are almost exclusively populated by elements of the natural world. In Haythe's interview, Ammons was quoted as saying that the city represented for him "the artificial, the limited, the defined, the stalled."

With "limits" interpreted as a verb, it is possible to read the poem as Ammons's response as to where his poetic inspiration comes from, or, rather, where it does not

come from. It does not come from civilization but from nature. Ammons's poetic inspiration is derived from the natural world and spreads its "radiance" back on the disparate elements of that world uniformly. The rank stench of excrement has as much chance of being woven into a poem as does the perfumed scent of a flower. Ammons does not rank nature's creations or its destructions; they all have equal chance of being realized into poems.

The God of the Old Testament reigned over all no matter how great or how small. His was the power to create and destroy, and the natural world is a testament to that power. The inspiration that drives Ammons as poet, like the Old Testament God, turns its eyes upon the natural world indiscriminately, upon its creations as well as its destructions. It is not an inspiration that tiptoes through rose gardens; rather, like the Old Testament God, it "pours," and "bears," and "storms" down upon the world relentlessly.

Just as the God of Genesis saw everything that he had made and praised it as being "very good," Ammons has turned the light of his inspiration on all of that creation and turned it into a song of praise.

Source: Mark White, Critical Essay on "The City Limits," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Costello describes "The City Limits" as an "eloquent example" of Ammons's mastery of poetic technique.

Ammons will return to the stance of the pilgrim throughout his career, but beginning with his second book, *Expressions of Sea Level,* a different stance begins to emerge, one relatively impersonal, comprehensive, and didactic. Where the medium of the pilgrim poet is ritual gesture, the medium of the sage is abstract proposition and example. The revelation of pattern dominates here over the articulation of self. Problems of identity fall away and the self becomes a node of consciousness through which the shape of the world reveals itself. Where nature in the pilgrim phase is variously the ally or antagonist to the poet's will, here it is the embodiment of dynamic design, often articulated in abstract titles. Critics have emphasized Ammons's interest in "ecological naturalism," and certainly the greater particularity, the assimilation of "facts" from the biological and earth sciences, and especially the emphasis on cycles, habitats, and cooperative behaviors in the natural world, resonate with developments in the environmental movement. Still, the natural environment is not the subject of these poems so much as a resource for exemplifying and troping their subject, which is "the form of a motion."

Ammons draws on natural imagery to give authority to his vision of pattern, and to remove it from the social and psychological attachments it inevitably has when embodied in human institutions. There remains an experiential element to these meditations in which knowledge is a process, incomplete and subject to the shifting conditions of observer and observed world. But an expansive, visionary posture and generalizing impulse prevail. The prophet-subject identifies with motion rather than being subject to it. Ammons's particular challenge is to reconcile this Thoreauvian idea of dwelling with his Emersonian emphasis on motion. "Can we make a home in motion?" he asks throughout his career, and explicitly and affirmatively in *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* (1974). In what I am calling the sage poems he begins to identify the text and the landscape as parts of a dynamic patterning where mind and world, thought and its object, become intertwined. Neither is firmly grounded in the other. Thus the power terms that motor the narrative of subject/object relations in the pilgrim poems fall away. While Ammons remains attached to a figure of "mirroring mind" it is clear that the model of cognition is not really the mirror but something more mobile and improvisatory (rather than ritualized, as before). Mapping may be the operative term for what the mind does, rather than mirroring, if we accept the map as an instrument of navigation rather than an objective diagram of reality.

Designed though it is to convey a Whitmanian plurality, the prophetic stance remains selective in the nature to which it attends. This phase is initiated with "expressions of sea level," not sermons on mountaintops. Ammons grew up in the mountains of North Carolina, but from early on he eschewed the iconology of the mountain, which in our culture has signified stability, endurance, remote imperial power, sublimity, and transcendence. The early poems of dispersal involve a repeated dismantling of hierarchical organizations. A poem still in the pilgrim mode, "Mountain Talk," makes this

preference explicit, glancing at the "massive symmetry and rest" of the mountain and its "changeless prospect," but rejecting its "unalterable view," and he repeats it in "A Little Thing Like That" from *Brink Road* (1996): "I have always felt, / as one should, I think, shy / of mountains." In this middle phase Ammons need not dismantle hierarchical orders because he has set his gaze where nothing builds too high. In giving the seashore a central role, Ammons follows an American tradition of leveled, horizontal relations, of many as one, and of a permeable boundary between stability and flux. The seashore is precisely not a home, though it may be a habitat. It provides a simple, generally uniform, horizontal image with a maximum of local change and adjustment. It thus becomes an ideal figure for a decentered world. It is in this gnomic phase that the colon arises as a major signature of Ammons's work, a sign with multiple, ambiguous significations, marking permeable boundaries, tentative sponsorships, as well as analogical possibilities. Similarly, the preposition "of" emerges in this phase to create metaphors yoking concrete and abstract terms and to override the subject/object dichotomy.

Ammons's walk poems, central to this phase, are in a sense what the pilgrim poems grow into. The sage's poems are not emblematic (they do not convey idea by reducing and abstracting image), but analogical. The sage moves freely in and out of a representational scene, geography of mind and geography of landscape, text and referent, allowing for the play of contingent vision without restriction to a narrow perspective. In the pilgrim poems the one/many relation is experienced as a crisis or problem, whereas the walk poems present this relation as a primary dynamic of form. The pilgrim figure seeks a home, whether by mastery or by submission; he seeks to colonize or become accepted into the infinite. The prophet figure in the walk poems already identifies with the movement he conveys. Since the one/many is not a problem to be resolved but a reality to be apprehended and experienced, these poems are less sequential or narrative than they are serial and reiterative. Since the speaker identifies with the movement of reality, he does not need to discover it in a teleological process, but rather enacts it in an improvisatory process backed by a confident metonymic system. The tendency to evoke an infinite unity at the end, without claiming a "final vision" for the poet, is even clearer in "Saliences" than in the more famous "Corson's Inlet":

where not a single thing endures,
the overall reassures;
. . .
earth brings to grief
much in an hour that sang, leaped, swirled,
yet keeps a round
quiet turning,
beyond loss or gain,
beyond concern for the separate reach.

One feels that the poem's own rounding off is confirmed here, despite the clamor against the "separate reach."

The precursor to Ammons's prophetic voice is clearly Whitman, and, like Whitman, Ammons tends to identify the one/many paradigm with America. This is particularly true in "One: Many" which, like most of the prophetic poems, announces its procedure:

To maintain balance
between one and many by
keeping in operation both one and many.

The poem again locates vision initially in the experiential, and in a descriptive, narrative form. "I tried to summarize a moment's events," he tells us, and goes on to instantiate the one/many in terms of a description of natural objects and events at "creek shore." This section of the poem then embodies the one/many balance even as it stands, in terms of the poem as a whole, for the one, yielding in the next section to the transpersonal many of the American continent and its *e pluribus unum.* Careful not to make his path across the continent a "straight line," the prophetic mind zigzags from California to Maine and from Michigan to Kansas, integrating cultural and natural images and overriding all dualities. The device of the list becomes, again as in Whitman's poetry, a major formal embodiment of the one/many balance, and Ammons's use of it is careful. In this poem the list has a centrifugal force out from the I, so that the I is released even as it continually penetrates back into the plurality through anaphora ("I tried to think. . . ."; "I considered. . . ."). The list functions oppositely in the second section, where the I does not provide the hub from which details spin out, but rather intrudes with personal commentary upon the manifest plurality:

Art Museum, Prudential Building, Knickerbocker
Hotel
(where Cummings stayed);
of North Carolina's
Pamlico and Albemarle Sounds, outer banks,
shoals,
telephone wire loads of swallows,
of Columbus County
where fresh-dug peanuts
are boiled
in iron pots, salt filtering
in through boiled-clean shells (a delicacy
true
as artichokes or Jersey
asparagus): and on and on through the villages.

The parenthesis, like the colon, becomes a device for interpenetration of the one and the many.

Because Ammons is constantly announcing his own practices, criticism has seemed very redundant. But in the behavior of the poem, rather than in its subject matter or discursive content, we find aesthetic and emotional satisfaction. "Poetry is action," and "poetry recommends," by its behavior, "certain kinds of behavior." Ammons's reflexivity

is itself a particular kind of poetic behavior. "Terrain," for instance, after launching a description by way of metaphor ("the soul is a region without definite boundaries"), enters into the second term, forgetting its sponsorship. But, within that second term, the one/many dynamic, which is the real subject of the poem, is reiterated in landscape terms. The soul/body or self/landscape dichotomy is transposed into a network of landscape relations, and duality vanishes. The gnomic proposition that opens the poem yields to a perceptual/experiential model as the poet uses present tense to bring forward the landscape, reversing tenor and vehicle. The "like" in the line "It floats (self-adjusting) like a continental mass" recalls us to the initial metaphor, but the sponsorship of simile is weak and yields altogether to description, which enfolds simile rather than extending it: "river systems thrown like winter tree-shadows." Nature's internal resemblances displace a Cartesian model of mirror- ing mind. The correspondences of soul/region convert to correspondences within the geography itself□" where it towers most / extending its deepest mantling base." The second stanza of this poem adjusts the intersections that have become too symmetrical, so that "floods unbalancing / gut it, silt altering the / distribution of weight." "Weight" brings us back from illusion to the presence of the poem; we feel the weight not in the referential silt but in the "nature of content"□the weight of the "soul," which is the subject of the poem. This extraordinary interpenetration of consciousness and its object returns us, cyclically, to the poem's opening, but only momentarily.

The poem seeks other means of mapping the one/many/one paradigm. The images of imbalance are followed by images of dissolution:

a growth into
destruction of growth,
change of character,
invasion of peat by poplar and oak: semi-precious
stones and precious metals drop from muddy water
into mud.

The region is coming apart into multiplicity and separateness (after the earlier symmetry and correspondence). The landscape endures a kind of crisis of multiplicity and separateness□"whirlwinds move through it / or stand spinning like separate orders: the moon / comes: / there are barren spots: bogs, rising / by self-accretion from themselves." But if the orders that initiate the poem are entropic, the stanza recuperates with a structure of collision moving toward the "poise" of "countercurrents." The stanza divisions mark an overall pattern presiding in the shifts in focus and organization. The stanza I have quoted moves away from the large geographic model of continental plates and river systems to a more local model of "habitat." The "region" is now far more liquid□it does not just contain lakes and rivers and marshes but is itself "a crust afloat." In this model the sponsoring unity ("the soul" or "continental mass") gives way to "a precise ecology of forms / mutually to some extent / tolerable"□a strange phrase in which precision and approximation must somehow become compatible. But at the same time this "precision" moves to an increasingly imprecise language, a mysticism of "the soul" quite different from earlier geological references. Description turns back into heightened metaphor and visionary stance: "foam to the deep and other-natured: / but

deeper than depth, too: a vacancy and swirl: // it may be spherical, light and knowledge merely / the iris and opening / to the dark methods of its sight." The phrase "whirls and stands still" cues the poem to rest in the interpenetration of imagination and earth: "the moon comes: terrain." This gesture marks the poem's unity, providing a double refrain□one internal to the poem, one echoing the title to complete a cycle.

As "Terrain" indicates, particularity in the prophetic phase derives from enumerative rather than descriptive rhetoric. The most eloquent example is "City Limits," which realizes vision in form. The relation of one and many inheres in the play of the unifying syntax and pluralizing diction: "when you // consider that air or vacuum, snow or shale, squid or wolf, rose or lichen, / each is accepted into as much light as it will take." The heavy enjambment works with the lexical diversity to maximize freedom in form and to create the sense of expansion the poem wishes to convey emotionally. What Randall Jarrell said of Whitman applies here: Ammons's lists are "little systems as beautifully and astonishingly organized as the rings and satellites of Saturn." Here the polarities indicate not only range, but also tension resolved, dualities overcome□good and evil, life and death, nature and culture, high and low. Collisions in the diction ("natural slaughter," "storms of generosity," "goldskeined wings of flies") have a liberating effect within the constancy of "the radiance." Collisions become chords in the one / many harmony. The coordinating conjunction "or" creates an array of oppositions held in tension: "snow or shale" in textural or "rose or lichen" in visual parallel. Not too much is made of these arrangements. They remain local and metamorphic, yielding to other terms of connection. Similarly the anaphora that binds the list shifts its position in the line so that litany does not become harangue.

The pleasures of the prophetic phase are many and it is still the phase readers most associate with Ammons. It delights in the revival of form in inexhaustible substance, the rediscovery of pattern in particulars. "Scope is beyond me" not because the beholder's vision fails but because motion is the essential nature of this pattern. What this mode gives up, largely, is the self's direct, experiential engagement with the life it beholds. Motion remains theoretical, a matter of spectacle rather than impact. For all their apparent spontaneity and contingency, these are poems of thoughts more than thinking, life viewed more than felt. By making a home in motion, in its form, the sage evades its force. . . .

Source: Bonnie Costello, "Ammons: Pilgrim, Sage, Ordinary Man," in *Raritan*, Vol. 21, No. 3, Winter 2002, pp. 130-58.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Hoffman and Sutro examine the canon of Ammons's work in the tradition of American Romantic poetry.

A. R. Ammons is an American Romantic in the tradition of Emerson and Whitman. He is committed to free and open forms and to the amassing of the exact details experience provides rather than to the extrusion from it of any a priori order. His favorite subject is the relation of a man to nature as perceived by a solitary wanderer along the beaches and rural fields of New Jersey, where Ammons grew up. Because of the cumulative nature of his technique, Ammons's work shows to best advantage in poems of some magnitude. Perhaps the best, and best known, of these is the title poem from *Corsons Inlet*, in which, describing a walk along a tidal stream, the speaker says,

I was released from forms,
from the perpendiculars,
straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds
of thought
into the hues, shading, rises, flowing bends and
blends of
sight . . .

Here as elsewhere Ammons accepts only what is possible to a sensibility attuned to the immediacy of experience, for he admits that "scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of vision, / that I have perceived nothing completely, / that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk."

Another kind of poem characteristic of Ammons is the brief metaphysical fable, in which there are surprising colloquies between an interlocutor and mountains, winds, or trees, as in "Mansion":

So it came time
for me to cede myself
and I chose
the wind
to be delivered to.
The wind was glad
and said it needed all
the body
it could get
to show its motions with . . .

The philosophical implications in these poems are explicit in "What This Mode of Motion Said," a meditation upon permanence and change phrased as a cadenza on Emerson's poem "Brahma."

Ammons's *Collected Poems 1951-1971* was chosen for the National Book award in 1973. Not included in this compendious volume is his booklength *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, a free-flowing imaginative journal composed in very short lines and written on a roll of adding machine tape. The combination here of memory, introspection, and observation rendered in ever changing musical phrasing is impressive. Such expansiveness is Ammons's métier. *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* is a long poem in 155 twelve-line stanzas that comprise one unbroken sentence. Taking Whitman and Stevens as his models, Ammons combines the allinclusive sensibility of the one with the meditative philosophical discourse of the other, as these excerpts may suggest:

. . . the identifying oneness of populations, peoples:
I
know my own□the thrown peripheries, the stragglers,
the cheated,
maimed, afflicted (I know their eyes, pain's melting
amazement)

the weak, disoriented, the sick, hurt, the castaways,
the
needful needless: I know them: I love them, I am
theirs . . .
the purpose of the motion of a poem is to bring the
focused,
awakened mind to no-motion, to a still contemplation
of the
whole motion, all the motions, of the poem . . .

. . . by intensifying the alertness
of the conscious mind even while it permits itself
to sink,
to be lowered down the ladder of structured motions
to the
refreshing energies of the deeper self . . .
the non-verbal
energy at that moment released, transformed back
through the
verbal, the sayable poem . . .

Ammons continued to revel in both long wandering poems and shorter lyrics in his volume *Sumerian Vistas*. As he points out in "The Ridge Farm," a meditative poem of fifty-one stanzas, "I like nature poetry / where the brooks are never damned up . . . " His work is consistent in its experimentation with open forms and in its celebration of living processes and of the identity of man with nature.

Perhaps Ammons's most profound study of culture, human behavior, and the physical world is his 1993 fin de siècle long poem titled *Garbage*, in which he attempts to link science, spirituality, and philosophy as modes through which to evaluate garbage.

Ammons garbage has a force that brings communities together. Refuse expresses something essential about us; it is the originating point of communal consciousness and survival. His desire to know "simple people doing simple things, the normal, everyday routine of life and how these people thought about it" finds him recognizing "a monstrous surrounding of / gathering□the putrid, the castoff, the used, / / the mucked up□all arriving for final assessment." Historian, archeologist, culturalist, environmentalist, and□for this book's project□ garbologist, Ammons uses the figure of "curvature," which shows that "it all wraps back around," to cast the net wide enough to consider the various angles of garbage, even though the central figure of the book is the garbage dump itself.

Aesthetic involvement in our physical world and the processes of assembly and disassembly are Ammons's perennial concerns. In *Brink Road* he approaches a world largely unpeopled but still in motion and perpetuity: " . . . a snowflake / streaks / out of the hanging gray, / winter's first whitening: white on white let it be, / then, flake / to petal□ to hold for a / minute or so." Often compared with Robert Frost and e. e. cummings, Ammons has a voice that sometimes hits a note with a Zen ring to it. In "Saying Saying Away" he revealingly contends that poems "flow into a place where the distinction between meaning and being is erased into the meaning of / being."

Winner of the National Book award in both 1973 and 1993 and recipient of the Robert Frost medal for the Poetry Society of America for his life's work, Ammons has had a prolific career that has carried him to his long volume *Glare*, which has the tone of a kind of diary looping evenly, meditatively, seemingly inconsequentially back to itself. At its best moments it moves with a Wordsworthian grace typical of Ammons's early work:

if you can
send no word silently healing, I
mean if it is not proper or realistic
to send word, actual lips saying
these broken sounds, why, may we be
allowed to suppose that we can work
this stuff out the best we can and
having felt out our sins to their
deepest definitations, may we walk with
you as along a line of trees, every
now and then your clarity and warmth
shattering across our shadowed way.

Source: Daniel Hoffmann and Martha Sutro, "Ammons, A. R.," in *Contemporary Poets*, 7th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 2001, pp. 24-25.

Adaptations

The Modern Poetry Association of Chicago released a seven-cassette collection of poets discussing their craft with their peers. The collection is titled *Poets in Person* (1991). It includes a half-hour interview between Ammons and Alice Fulton.

In 1984, Ammons read several of his poems for the radio series *New Letters on the Air*, produced by the literary journal *New Letters*. This program, hosted by Judy Ray, was released on cassette by *New Letters*.

The American Academy of Poets maintains a web page about Ammons at http://www.poets. org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=49 that includes links to poems and biographical information as well as an in-depth profile of the poet from their Summer 1998 issue.

Topics for Further Study

Read a psychology report about how sunlight affects humans and report on the current theories.

The fourth stanza of this poem focuses on flies and their habits. Research one species of fly common to your geographical area and prepare some sort of visual presentation to help your classmates get to know this fly better.

This poem was first published when the environmental movement was new. Participate in an environmentally friendly activity or similar event and prepare an audio tape collage of the voices of local environmental leaders.

Choose one line from this poem that you find crucial and expand it into your own poem, with three lines per stanza. Try to take your ideas in a different direction than the one Ammons explores.

Compare and Contrast

1970s: New government laws are being passed to restrict water and air pollution and to protect forests and endangered species.

Today: Few new environmental laws are passed; instead, existing laws are repealed as being unfair to local businesses.

1970s: The activities of cells are considered to be among nature's greatest mysteries.

Today: Even with the recent completion of the Human Genome Project, all questions about cellular activity are not answered; however, scientists have a good sense of how information is transmitted throughout the body.

1970s: Americans are eating more and more beef: per capita consumption of beef rises almost 50 percent between the early sixties and mid seventies, when it reaches its all-time high.

Today: Knowledge about the effects of red meat on the body have caused a shift in the American diet to lighter meats; still, the nation's reliance on fast food has caused an increase in American obesity.

1970s: One aspect of the "hippie" movement of the 1960s is the call to "return to nature," indicating a distrust of political and social values.

Today: The word "natural" retains its positive connotation and is used to sell millions of dollars in food and health remedies. Independentlyrun health food stores are supplanted by publiclytraded chains.

What Do I Read Next?

Garbage (1993), Ammons's book-length poem in eighteen chapters, is considered a modern masterpiece. It won the National Book Award in 1993.

A contemporary poet whose writings have often been compared to Ammons's is Pattiann Rogers. The best works of her career have been collected in the *Song of the World Becoming: Poems, New and Collected, 1971-2001* (2001).

Critics considering Ammons's poetry usually draw a connection to the work of American poet Walt Whitman. Their styles are seldom similar, but both men share a common sensibility about the natural world. Whitman's masterpiece, *Leaves of Grass*, was published in 1855 and has been in print continuously since then.

Diane Ackerman writes long essays that combine ideas of nature and philosophy in much the same way that Ammons's poetry does. One of her most widely read and accessible books is *A Natural History of the Senses* (1990).

Much of Ammons's best nonfiction writing is collected in *Set in Motion: Essays, Interviews, and Dialogs* (1997), published by University of Michigan Press. It includes a lengthy interview from the renowned *Paris Review* interviews.

Further Study

Cushman, Stephen, "A. R. Ammons, or the Rigid Lines of the Free and Easy," in *Critical Essays on A. R. Ammons*, edited by Robert Kirschten, G. K. Hall, 1997, pp. 271-308, originally published in *Fictions of Form in American Poetry*, Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 149-86.

Cushman examines one section of one of Ammons's longer works, showing the interplay between free verse and the poet's sense of structure, which sneaks into his work at discreet moments.

Holder, Alan, "Plundering Stranger," in *A. R. Ammons*, Twayne's United States Authors Series, No. 303, Twayne Publishers, 1978, pp. 74-89.

In this relatively early survey of Ammons's works, Holder focuses on the various ways in which nature is used in the poet's works.

Kirschten, Robert, "Ammons's Sumerian Songs: Desert Laments and Eastern Quests," in his *Approaching Prayer: Ritual and the Shape of Myth in A. R. Ammons and James Dickey*, Louisiana State University Press, 1998.

In this article, Kirschten, who has written much about Ammons, writes about Ammons in terms of the similarities between his ideas and Eastern philosophy.

Schneider, Steven P., *A. R. Ammons and the Poetics of Widening Scope*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994.

Schneider examines the ways in which Ammons's overall poetic vision can be seen in the imagery, form, and subject matter of his poems.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamedfor 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.

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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.

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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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