Climbing Study Guide

Climbing by Lucille Clifton

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Introduction

"Climbing" is the first original poem in Lucille Clifton's collection *The Book of Light*, published by Copper Canyon Press, in 1993. It is in a section titled "Reflection," which comes directly after a found poem, "Light." In a lyric of twelve short lines, Clifton uses simple, accessible language to imagine what it would be like to be sixty years old. The speaker imagines herself in the future and uses that image to make statements to herself about what might have been different in her life. The poem's tone, however, is not one of despair but rather of achievement. The speaker doesn't really wish she had made other choices; rather, she seems proud of the decisions she has made and acknowledges the struggle ahead as she ages. Themes that the poem addresses include the relationship between ageing and desire, time and regret, and the ways in which self-image changes as human beings age. Clifton was in her midfifties when she wrote the poem, and there is much autobiographical material in it. The title of the collection could just as easily have been called *The Book of Lucille*, as Lucille derives from the Latin word *lucius*, meaning "light." Many of the poems in the collection address family members, both dead and alive, and a few poems address political figures, such as Senator Jesse Helms, and fictional figures, such as Clark Kent. Some are dramatic monologues, others confessional lyrics. All of the poems are marked by revelation and insight and evoke universal experiences to appeal to readers.

Author Biography

Born in 1936 to working-class parents Samuel Louis and Thelma Lucille Sayles, Lucille Clifton grew up in Depew, New York. She is descended from a long line of strong, resilient women who have battled and overcome adversity. Her greatgreat grandmother, Caroline Donald, whom Clifton cites as the inspiration for much of her poetry, was kidnapped from her home in Dahomey, West Africa, and brought to America along with her mother, sister, and brother. Clifton gives a full accounting of her family's story in her 1976 memoir *Generations*. After attending Howard University and Fredonia State Teachers College (now State University of New York College at Fredonia), Clifton worked as a claims clerk for the New York State Division of Employment and then as a literature assistant for the Central Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory. She began teaching in 1971 at Coppin State College after winning the Discovery Award from the New York YW-YMHA Poetry Center and publishing *Good Times: Poems* in 1969, named by the *New York Times* as one of the year's ten best books. Since then, Clifton has garnered numerous other awards including National Endowment for the Arts awards, 1969, 1970, and 1972; the Juniper Prize for *Two-Headed Woman* from the University of Massachusetts in 1980; two Pulitzer Prize nominations for her poetry; the Lannan Literary Award for poetry in 1996 for *The Terrible Stories*; a 1999 Lila Wallace- Reader's Digest Writers' Award; and a National Book Award for poetry in 2000 for *Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems, 1988-2000*. Clifton is also an accomplished writer of children's books. Some of these include *My Brother Fine with Me* (1975), *Three Wishes* (1976), *Amifika* (1977), and *The Lucky Stone* (1979). She has also authored the popular Everett Anderson series of books for juveniles.

Her poetry is rooted in her experience as an African-American woman raised in an impoverished urban environment, who has a strong and enduring love for her family and community. Critics praise her work as fresh and honest and cite her ability to craft powerful, evocative images that express pride in her identity as a black woman. However, her most powerful poems, such as "Climbing," transcend gender and race to get at the heart of the human condition. Since 1990, Clifton has been St. Mary's Distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary's College of Maryland.

Poem Text

a woman precedes me up the long rope,
her dangling braids the color of rain.
maybe i should have had braids.
maybe i should have kept the body i started,
slim and possible as a boy's bone.
maybe i should have wanted less.
maybe i should have ignored the bowl in me
burning to be filled.
maybe i should have wanted less.
the woman passes the notch in the rope
marked Sixty. i rise toward it, struggling,
hand over hungry hand.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

In the first few lines of "Climbing," the speaker sets the tone of the poem by describing a ghostly apparition. By describing the woman on the rope as having "dangling braids the color of rain," the speaker signals that she is in the realm of the imagination. Rain is transparent and has no color *per se*. Rope, as a symbol, has many associations: it is both a form of transportation and a device used to pull things. It can also be used to hang people. The fact that it is a "long rope" implies that the speaker has a hard journey ahead of her.

Lines 3-5

In these lines, the speaker begins the list of "maybe's" that structure the rest of the poem. By questioning whether she herself should have had braids, the speaker introduces the subject of regret. Braids themselves are decorative□and dangling braids more so□suggesting youth and vitality and a degree of sensuality. The speaker follows up this statement with a similar regret, this time wondering if she should have kept her younger body, which she describes as "slim and possible as a boy's bone." Young boys are still growing into their bodies, hence the idea of possibility, of something not yet completely formed. Readers can infer that the speaker no longer has this kind of body but also that it is an impossible desire. Bodies change with age. Although exercise, diet, and close attention to one's health can shape the way a body changes with time, a changing body is inevitable.

Lines 6-9

In these lines, the speaker reflects on the degree of desire she has had in her life. She uses the metaphor of the bowl inside of her to represent this desire. The image of the bowl is significant because it suggests food and the idea of hunger, which will reappear at the end of the poem. Clifton mixes her metaphors when she writes that the bowl is "burning to be filled," but the image works because it underlines the speaker's lust for life and love. Again the speaker presents an idea that may have nothing to do with choice. Can people really "choose" what they desire, or is desire itself so linked to the human body and identity that to ignore it would be to ignore oneself? Clifton repeats the line "maybe I should have wanted less" to underscore the ruminative voice of the speaker as she climbs upward.

Lines 10-12

In these lines, the mystery of the rope is made clear. It symbolizes life itself and the way that human beings age. Another way to visualize the rope is to think of it as a timeline

with a notch for each decade. The woman in front of the speaker "passes the notch in the rope / marked Sixty," meaning that she has turned sixty years old. The speaker's "struggling" to "rise toward it" means that she herself is approaching sixty, battling the processes of aging, yet still envisioning herself as a youthful woman full of life and the desire to live. This lust for life is embodied in the last image of the poem, which echoes the "bowl . . . / burning to be filled" described earlier in the poem. Hands can be hungry in the sense that they are always grasping for more and craving satisfaction. In this sense, they are metaphoric of the speaker's needs.

Themes

Transformation

There is an old adage that the only constant in life is change. Clifton emphasizes the idea of change by describing the desires of her present self in relation to versions of her past and future selves. The present self is the struggling self, full of anxiety and dread, the one who questions the life she has led. These doubts are underscored in the litany of "maybe's" the speaker rattles off. The past self is the one of the youthful body, as "slim and possible as a boy's bone." This self, like the present one, is full of desire and a lust for life, with a "bowl . . . / burning to be filled." The future self is more enigmatic, ghostly. She "precedes" the speaker on the rope, "her dangling braids the color of rain," and she "passes the notch in the rope / marked Sixty." Such a description suggests a woman who has come to terms with the changes in her life and who charges into the future, confident of who she is and the choices she has made. This version of the speaker's future self is still possible, and the speaker climbs towards her as she climbs towards her sixtieth year. The final image of the poem is one of a woman who reflects on her past while keeping an eye on a future ideal. Her continued hunger for life highlights the idea that she will weather coming changes.

Death

The very title of the poem emphasizes upward movement, often symbolically associated with growth. However, for a human being, the act of climbing also requires effort and a goal, something to climb toward. For the speaker of "Climbing," that goal isn't a chosen one but one that is built in, part of the natural process of ageing. The "goal," the culmination of aging, is death, and although the speaker never says the word, it hovers over the poem, the final notch in the rope. The woman who precedes the speaker on the rope is a future version of the speaker and someone closer to death than the speaker. She is "climbing" up the rope because aging also requires effort. One must battle feelings of regret both for things done and left undone, and one must continue to hope and to live in the face of a failing body and the imminence of death itself. Like a notch in the rope of ageing, "Sixty," for many people, signifies the end of middle age. Retirement is often a few years away, and people begin to think of how they will spend the rest of their lives. The speaker "struggles" towards this notch because she is both fearful of it and desirous of living more, of wanting more from life. She underscores that desire in the image of the "hungry hand."

Style

Lyric

"Climbing" is a lyric poem. Lyrics are short, first-person poems focusing on the speaker's emotional or mental state. They are often melodic and often based in the imagination rather than in the empirically verifiable real world. The word *lyric* derives from the Greek *lyre*, meaning a musical instrument once used to accompany poems. Clifton's poem stimulates the imagination when she describes her ghostly double preceding her on the rope of life. The poem's melody is due in part to its repetition of the phrase "maybe i should have." As one of poetry's oldest forms, the lyric has evolved into a variety of kinds including the ballad, the ode, and the sonnet. Most people today recognize the plural form of lyric as referring to a song's words. Well-known writers of lyric poetry include Emily Dickinson, William Shakespeare, and Robert Frost.

Punctuation

Clifton uses lower case throughout the poem, de-emphasizing the idea of new beginnings that capital letters at the start of sentences mark. Using the small *i* throughout illustrates a speaker who, paradoxically, doesn't take herself too seriously. This is paradoxical because lyric poems are all about the "I." The single capitalized word is "Sixty," signifying the importance of that word relative to others in the poem.

Historical Context

In the early 1990s, when "Climbing"was written, the entertainment industry in the United States was coming to recognize the approximately 19 million black women as a lucrative market. The development of this market was helped in part by the phenomenal success of Oprah Winfrey's talk show, nationally syndicated in 1986 and widely recognized as the most popular talk show in the history of television. Winfrey's success provided a positive image of black women and helped to combat the racial and gender stereotypes of black women in American society. Through her book club and the book club segment on her show, Winfrey has also helped to popularize books by and about successful black women. For example, Winfrey has chosen books by Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou as book club selections, giving the works of these literary giants broad appeal. Terry McMillan's two blockbuster hit novels, *Waiting to Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, capitalized on this market, and the films made from these novels have been critical as well as financial successes. With the growing audience for shows about African Americans and the increase in the number of black television executives, an all-black network was inevitable. Founded in the early 1990s, Black Entertainment Television (BET) runs sports shows, music videos, and reruns of series focusing on African Americans.

The status of American women in the 1990s was also changing. Feminist theorists refer to the 1990s as marking the advent of third wave feminism. Often defined in generational terms, third wave feminism refers to the response of younger women to feminist issues and other feminists. In "A Manifesto for Third Wave Feminism," Tamara Strauss writes:

> So an intergenerational struggle has sprung forth between mothers and daughters. On the one side are Second Wavers who lashed out against their sexually limiting roles as wives and mothers in exchange for equal pay and egalitarian partnerships. And on the other are Third Wavers who, perhaps dismissive of the battles fought and often won by their mothers, aspire to be Madonna, the woman who rose to fame as the ultimate virgin whore. Third Wavers . . . want to continue the fight for equal rights, but not to the detriment of their sexuality. They want to be both subject and object, when it comes to their sexual roles, their political power and their place in American culture.

These competing roles and conflicting desires are no doubt evident in Clifton's appraisal of her own life. As a prolific author of poetry and children's books, a wife, a professor, a mother of six, and a grandmother, Clifton has had to balance numerous demands on her time and attention. Rather than "wanting less," however, Clifton has always desired more for herself and her family. The fact that she is approaching the "end of her rope" occasions reflection and the sense that she could have done more. Statistically, Clifton

has less than ten years of life left. For black women in the United States, life expectancy is 73.9 years, a little more than five years less than all American females.

Aging itself has become an international subject of research and concern. Paul Wallace, author of *Agequake*, writes about the world's population: "We have been remarkably young. Our average age has been around 20 or less. But in the current generation's lifetime, the average age of the world will nearly double from 22 in 1975 to 38 in 2050, according to the UN's latest projections issued at the end of 1998. . . . Many countries will reach average ages of 50 or more." Changes accompanying such a shift will include reassessing the future of the 9 to 5 work week, pension funds, and social security, providing health care for the aging, maintaining a stable and creative work force, and for rigidly patriarchal countries like Japan, re-thinking women's role in society, as the number of women in the world will increase.

Critical Overview

The book jacket of *The Book of Light* contains quotations from two prominent poets, Sharon Olds and Denise Levertov, that typify the critical response to the book. Olds writes, "These are poems of fierce joy, made as if under the pressure of passionate witness . . . They [the book's poems] have the exactness and authority of laws of nature□they are principles of life." Levertov is equally effusive in her praise, writing, "poem after poem exhilarates and inspires awe at the manifestation of such artistic and spiritual power." Reviewing the collection for *Poetry*, Calvin Bedient expresses reservations about Clifton's politics but commends her development as a poet, writing, "If this poet's art has deepened since her 1969 debut volume, *Good Times*, it's in an increased capacity for quiet delicacy and fresh generalization. *The Book of Light* contains several poems that show Clifton's penchant and gift for lucid self-assessment, indeed a forbearance toward herself and her family like that of the moon for the earth." In a review for *Belles Lettres*, Andrea Lockett writes that the collection is "a gift of joy, a truly illuminated manuscript by a writer whose powers have been visited by grace."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

Semansky publishes widely in the field of twentieth- century poetry and culture. In the following essay, he considers how Clifton's poem uses the idea of doubling as a strategy for self-reflection.

Clifton uses the image of the doppelganger to reflect on the life that she's had and to envision her future life. *Doppelganger* is a German word for *alter ego*, or *other self*, and it marks just one of the "doubling" techniques Clifton uses in "Climbing." The doppelganger motif is popular in literature and has been used by many poets and writers, including Edgar Allen Poe, Octavio Paz, Robert Louis Stevenson, Oscar Wilde, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Writers often create versions of their other selves as mirrors of sorts to provide them with a clearer picture of their own lives. These representations are often either idealized or demonized projections of a part of the writer. For example, in Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper," the woman the narrator sees in the yellow wallpaper is a symbolic projection of the speaker's self struggling to break free of patriarchal oppression.

Clifton's double is an idealized version of the self she wants to become. It "precedes" her on the rope of life because it exists only in the future. Many people imagine what they will be like in the future and attempt to gauge their progress in relation to that image. The problem, of course, is that the future is already here, and idealized versions of oneself must, by their very nature, remain unattainable. This is also the paradox of desire itself: it can only exist with an object; once that object is attained, there must be a new one. Significantly, Clifton never presents an image of this idealized self's body. It is represented only by "braids the color of rain." Braids, an interweaving of strands of hair, are themselves another image of doubling, a way in which many are made from one. As a trope□a figurative use of a word□the braids stand in for the many selves and bodies that proceed from the one body. Ropes themselves are braided strands of fiber, woven together to create a single, stronger thing. What, then, do braids signify? They signify the idea of youth itself: stylized and sensual, they mark their wearer as "hip" and confident. That the speaker doesn't wear them tells readers she is, stylistically at least, perhaps more conventional in appearance.

The speaker's body is at the center of the poem, but readers are never given an explicit representation of her body. It's clear, however, that body image is at least a part of what the speaker battles as she ages. Her desire for a younger body and her second-guessing of her past both point to common issues people encounter in the ageing process. Rather than giving in to these doubts, however, Clifton's speaker goes forward in spite of them.

"Climbing" is as much a poem about falling as it is about rising. There can be no struggle to "rise" without the fear of falling. In this case, falling means giving up on life and on the object before her: her idealized self, the one she would grow into. To fall would be to settle for less, to ignore the "bowl .. . / burning to be filled." The speaker climbs because she envisions herself moving towards that future self and what it

promises. That she never attains that self is irrelevant, for it is the climbing itself that is important, the desire to keep going. Rather than fearing the future, as Wilde's Dorian Gray might, Clifton embraces it.

Paralleling the idea of doubling is Clifton's use of repetition. The string of "maybe's" lengthens, as the years the speaker has lived and the notches she has already passed on the rope add up. Clifton's words also sonically embody "twosomeness," as in the alliterative phrases "boy's bone" and "bowl in me / burning." These images are themselves undergirded by the repetition of the phrase "maybe i should have wanted less," an inverted way of telling readers that she has wanted much.

The image of the other self provides a practical poetic vehicle for exploring the subject of re- gret, a common theme in Clifton's poetry. In the same collection as "Climbing" comes "it was a dream":

in which my greater self
rose up before me
accusing me of my life
with her extra finger
whirling in a gyre of rage
at what my days had come to.
what,
i pleaded with her, could i do,
oh what could i have done?
and she twisted her wild hair
and sparked her wild eyes
and screamed as long as
i could hear her
This. This. This.

The speaker's questioning of the "greater self" echoes the statements of regret in "Climbing," and, coincidentally, this self also has "wild hair." An observation that Wallace Peppers makes of poems from *An Ordinary Woman* can also be applied to those in *The Book of Light*: "The strong sense of general disappointment coupled with the sinking suspicion that one's life has missed the mark strikes responsive chords in many readers. And worse still, from the speaker's point of view, is the growing realization that this enormously unsatisfying condition is probably permanent." If regret is "terminal" in "it was a dream," it is ambiguous at best in "Climbing," for the "maybe's" don't ring true as missed opportunities. After all, how does one "want less," and how can anyone keep the body they started with? If anything, the speaker's tone in this poem is at once self-doubtful *and* defiant, the attitude like that of an athlete pushing forward toward the finish line. A poem closer in regret to "it was a dream" is the title poem of *An Ordinary Woman*, written when Clifton had almost hit the fortieth notch on the rope:

Plain as cake
an ordinary woman
i had expected to be

smaller than this,
more beautiful,
wiser in Afrikan ways,
more confident,
i had expected
more than this.
The sentiment is familiar.

Expectations, disappointment, acceptance: the stuff of an examined life. What was familiar at forty is familiar at sixty.

With aging comes reflection, and Clifton performs that act in both senses of the word: she looks back on her past and in that looking sees an image of herself in the future. The final image of doubling in the poem is the image of her "hungry" hands, the only body part of the present-tense speaker mentioned. Reflective readers, moved by Clifton's evocation of the struggle and joy that comes with desiring more from life, will see themselves in these hands.

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

Critical Essay #2

Hart is a freelance writer of literary themes. In this essay, she examines the ambiguity of the images in Clifton's poem and considers them as the meditations of one woman reflecting on her life, who, through the use of ambiguity, speaks to everyone.

At first reading, Lucille Clifton's poem "Climbing" seems to be made up of simple, seemingly non-complex words and fairly obvious images. Consisting of only twelve lines that create a single image of a woman climbing a metaphorical rope of time, "Climbing" could be read in a couple of minutes, smiled at, and then forgotten. But Clifton is a complicated woman, whose use of simple vocabulary and short-lined verse is not an indication of simple meaning or lack of depth. As Liz Rosenberg in her article in the *New York Times* puts it: "[W]hat may appear stylistically simple [in Clifton's poetry] is, upon close examination, an effort to free the true voice clear and plain."

In the poem "Climbing," Clifton raises her voice through metaphor, and upon closer reading, it becomes apparent that the images she creates are not so easy to define. However, it is through her use of simple vocabulary to create ambiguous imagery that Clifton draws her readers in and then opens her poem up to ever-expanding boundaries of definition. In this way, her poem becomes more than a meditation of one poet; it becomes a personal reflection for everyone who reads it.

With a very general sweep of the poem, anyone could define the basic element that exists here. This is a poem about a woman who is reflecting on her life. But what kind of woman is the speaker of this poem? Is she a general woman, symbolic of all womankind throughout history? Or is she more specific? Clifton has been described by some critics as a womanist writer. This term, allegedly coined by the writer Alice Walker, refers to a feminist point of view that targets the specific roles and circumstances of women of color. Besides the fact that Clifton herself is African American, there is a very strong possibility that this poem is purposely directed at African-American women and their needs.

The reader who looks closely might find implicit clues that refer to African-American women. For instance, Clifton begins her poem with a woman preceding the speaker of the poem "up a long rope." She describes this woman as having "dangling braids," which could be a possible reference to a popular hairstyle worn by African- American women. However, in the same line, she also gives these braids "the color of rain." So then the reader must ask, what is the color of rain? The color of rain is translucent, or is it? Rain is associated with dark, or black clouds, and overcast days that tone down colors into murky shades of gray. If rain is looked at through this lens, it may well be considered dark or even black. If the braids are considered black, then there is a hint, albeit slight, that this could be an image of a black woman.

But is it necessary to characterize or even identify this woman with braids? Clifton is ambiguous about this image, leaving it open for a broad range of interpretations. Readers can look at the clues, but even the clues are ambiguous, as ambiguous as the

color of rain. In their ambiguity, Clifton expands her images, allowing all readers to claim the images for themselves.

If this image of the woman with the braids the color of rain is taken on a more emotional level, the reference to rain could also be an allusion to tears, which look like rain drops. Readers might then ask: Why would this woman be crying? If Clifton's allusion is to an African-American woman, it would be very easy to list reasons why she might be crying. History (something that Clifton is very aware of) reveals the cruelties of slavery that continue to affect African-American women. In modern times, despite many positive strides in society, there still remain injustices of racism in the United States, as well as in the rest of the world. But even if Clifton's allusion were to a less specific race of women, if she wrote this poem for all women without discriminating between whether this was a black woman or a white woman, there are many women, having lived their lives in a patriarchal society, who have suffered injustices. Clifton, then, could be speaking in a feminist voice. By taking the image a step further, if this image of a woman were merely the reflection of the speaker of the poem (who is a woman), the image could be looked at as a selfreflection, opening the allusion to include males or any other reader of the poem as well. Emotions and tears, suffering and pain, are universals, experienced by all humankind.

As the poem progresses, the woman in the poem climbs up the rope as Clifton gives further examples or explanations as to the source of the emotions and shedding of tears. Before proceeding with the rest of the poem and the possible emotions behind the images, there still remains the question of who this woman in braids might be. It has already been decided that her race is not clearly defined, but even her age is ambiguous. She wears braids, a hairstyle that is usually reflective of youth. If she is younger than the speaker of the poem, why is she preceding the speaker in terms of time? Why does she pass "the notch in the rope / marked Sixty" before the speaker. If the color of rain is taken to be transparent, is this indicative of the woman in braids herself? Is she also transparent, having no race, no age, no corporeal distinction? Could she be a mythical image of womanhood that the speaker holds in her mind? Is she the alter ego of the speaker, someone that the speaker once thought she might be? Is she the youth of the speaker? Is this woman in braids somehow not only representative of the speaker's past but also indicative of her future, climbing the rope of time in front of her, leading her in some metaphorical way? Is she a more generic symbol of time, of dreams unfulfilled? There's a lot to ponder in the broad spaces that Clifton has left surrounding her images. But the fascinating thing about the broad spaces and Clifton's ambiguity is that the more these questions are pondered, the more comfortable the poem feels. Although ambiguity can be confusing, it also can inspire readers to fill in the empty places with answers of their own.

There may be many questions about who this woman in braids might be, but there are no questions that suggest that the speaker in this poem is reflecting on injustices in her life that have caused her pain. It is obvious that she is questioning the paths that she has chosen: "maybe i should have had braids. / maybe i should have kept the body i started / . . . maybe i should have wanted less." Clifton repeats this last line farther down in the poem, bringing home the sadness behind the statement. In wanting less, maybe

she would not now feel so "hungry." In wanting less, maybe she would not be "struggling." She is full in the sense of no longer being slim, but the fullness comes from the "bowl in me" which remains empty. Readers do not know what the speaker wanted that she did not receive. They do not know what the speaker hungers for. But it is this indefiniteness that draws the reader in. By not filling in the spaces, Clifton touches the empty spaces in all women, in all readers, in spite of their gender. She touches everyone who has ever experienced failure, disappointment, or injustice. But Clifton does not leave her readers in this place. She does not leave them lost in self-pity. Although she has suffered and commiserates with others who have suffered, Clifton is a woman with a positive attitude.

This positive attitude is expressed in different ways. For instance, in another of her poems, "song at midnight," she writes: "come celebrate / with me that everyday / something has tried to kill me / and has failed." The "something" is not named, but it is defined as potentially lethal. Despite the potential danger that threatens her, she wants to celebrate. She focuses on the fact that she has survived, not on the something that has tried to kill her. This is a message that Clifton most likes to deliver. She sets her poems up, exposing her concerns, empathizing with others who have experienced sadness and fears, but then she encourages movement, progression, even celebration. In her poetry, there are often two elements at play: both the dangers and frustrations of life and the resiliency of the speaker. This resiliency is also apparent in the poem "Climbing." Regardless of the speaker's sorrows, her tears, her pain, she keeps on climbing.

Although Clifton's poetry often takes on the sadder elements of life, it has also been referred to as joyful. As Rosenberg writes, "Ms. Clifton's poetry is big enough to accommodate sorrow and madness and yet her vision emerges as overwhelmingly joyous and calm." Clifton describes her own positive outlook on life in her poem "hag riding":

when i wake to the heat of morning
galloping down the highway of my life
something hopeful rises in me
rises and runs me out into the road
and i lob my fierce thigh high
over the rump of the day and honey
i ride i ride.

In her poem "Climbing," Clifton ends with her speaker rising, pulling herself up "hand over hungry hand." She is moving, despite her hunger, despite her struggles, despite her fear of death. She is moving, although she might not know where she is going or what is waiting for her along the way. In "Climbing," all she knows is that she is heading toward "Sixty," whatever that will mean. She does not know whether her hunger will be satisfied when she gets there. She does not know if her struggles will cease or become more difficult. She leaves many questions unanswered, as does this poem.

In another of her poems, however, she seems to console herself by hinting at a possible course of action in dealing with all those unanswered questions. In "evening and my dead once husband," she first ponders, "why cancer and terrible loneliness / and the wars against our people," but then she offers these lines in the same poem, as if in answer to all the questions that she has posed: "and out of the mist a hand / becomes flesh and i watch / as its pointing fingers spell / it does not help to know."

Maybe in Clifton's indefinite descriptions of race and age, or even in her uncertain allusions to earthly or mythical beings, she is saying that it is not in the knowing, it is not in the naming of specifics, it is not even in the naming of exact injustices or the pain caused by discrimination and unfairness and all the other frustrations and disappointments of life that one comes to accept human existence. In self-reflection it is not so important to second-guess what was not done, what could have been, what needs were never met. It's not about specifics at all. Life is vague, both in memories about the past and projected wishes for the future. Life is as vague and unanswerable as the images in Clifton's poetry.

One thing, however, that Clifton is not ambiguous about is her role as a poet. In an interview with Katie Davis on the radio program *All Things Considered*, Clifton had this to say: "I write about being human. If you have ever been human, I invite you to that place that we share." In the end, it does not matter who the images represent in the poem "Climbing." The poem is a meditation of a woman looking back on her life in an attempt to understand what waits for her in her future. In her meditation, the speaker beckons to everyone who reads this poem to follow, just as she is following the nondescript woman in braids. Do not forget what you have been through, the speaker seems to be saying, but don't ever let it stop you from climbing.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "Climbing," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Ketteler has taught literature and composition. In this essay, she discusses Lucille Clifton's use of an extended metaphor to highlight the importance of both personal and political struggles of black women.

"Climbing," by Lucille Clifton, is a poem about possibility and about rising to meet the challenges that life presents. Clifton's poetics are down to Earth; her language is straightforward and her images are sharp. She uses an extended metaphor of climbing a rope to paint a vivid picture of the struggle, as well as the beauty, inherent in black womanhood as she has experienced it.

The title of the poem is key: It sets the mood. It is not called "To Climb" or "The Climb" but "Climbing." Climb*ing* creates motion, implying active movement in the present. This is more than a story of past climbs; it is about the everyday climb of the present moment and of the future, which lies stretched out before the speaker. "Climbing" is an action poem. Whereas "action" might be associated more closely with epic poems written by men about war and history, Clifton's poem is distinctly about women. As a poet and children's book author, she has written on many topics but has continually returned to women's issues. Literary critic Andrea Benton Rushing sees Clifton's writing as unique:

> Several things set Clifton apart from the strophes of others. First, she has written more poems about women's lives than any other African-American poet, except Gwendolyn Brooks. Second, she has consistently done so with sinewy diction, a confiding voice, and stark imagery.

The first words of the poem are, in fact, "a woman." From the beginning, the speaker has made a decision to focus the reader's attention on the woman, and in a larger sense, on womanhood. The speaker is observing the woman as she passes her on the climb: "a woman precedes me up the long rope." The speaker calls attention to the action of climbing by situating herself as a climber and naming the woman as a fellow climber. The woman is actively climbing, not just up any rope but a *long* rope. In the next line, the speaker offers a short, physical description of the woman climbing: "her dangling braids the color of rain." This description makes the woman sound unique; the word "dangling" suggests grace and beauty, and the image of rain is one of peace and tranquility. This woman doesn't seem to be in a hurry; she is slowly climbing up the long rope. The presence of another climber also establishes that the speaker is not alone in her journey; there is a community of climbers.

As the speaker progresses up the rope, she begins to doubt herself, to ask herself nagging questions: "maybe i should have had braids. / maybe i should have kept the body I started, / slim and possible as a boy's bone." This set of images is rich and suggestive. The line "maybe i should have kept the body I started" implies that the speaker is no longer a young woman. Her body has seen the battle scars of

womanhood, and she is aging. In younger years, the speaker's body was full of possibility, "like a boy's bone," not totally grown to its full potential, but strong and confident. Women writers often address body issues; much poetry has been written about the female body as a site of struggle, and Clifton is echoing the sentiments expressed by many other women writers.

The self-doubt continues throughout the poem. The speaker's tone is a questioning one. Her voice is honest and sincere but not overconfident. As she climbs, she is looking back on her life, trying to decide if the struggle was worth it. "maybe i should have wanted less," she suggests to herself in line six. It is worth considering Clifton's personal politics, especially her involvement in the Civil Rights and Women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s. This line echoes the struggles of white women and African Americans in their fight for justice. "maybe i should have ignored the bowl in me / burning to be filled." The image of the empty bowl waiting to be filled is a vivid one, suggestive of many things: a thirst for knowledge, a desire to succeed and overcome obstacles, and a passion for creativity and self-expression.

In many ways, this is a poem about history the history humankind carries in the struggle forward. As the speaker questions herself, repeating "maybe i should have wanted less," she is recalling her history. To celebrate history is important for all people, but it is especially important for minority groups and white women, who still face significant barriers in many cultures. In other words, there is strength in remembering where one started.

Critically acclaimed novelist and essayist Alice Walker writes about this in her landmark collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. She describes teaching a group of underprivileged black women and struggling with this issue of valuing history: "How do you make them appreciate their own endurance, creativity, incredible loveliness of spirit? It should have been as simple as handing them a mirror, but it was not. How do you show a connection between past and present?" Clifton uses the extended metaphor of climbing to show a connection between past and present. She does not place the speaker in the poem alone on the rope; instead, she situates her within a community and a larger context. The struggle for freedom and for equal treatment and access to resources is more than an individual struggle; rather, it is a collective one.

"Climbing" is also a poem about ageing. Clifton is not a young woman when she writes this poem. It was included in a collection of poems entitled *The Book of Light*, published in 1993. (Clifton was born in 1936.) The words are not those of a young woman; instead, they are those of a woman who has lived several decades, whose life has followed a path and taken unexpected twists and turns, a woman who possesses the wisdom that comes along with a life well-lived. In the final lines of the poem, the speaker is looking toward something as she takes notice of her fellow climber: "the woman passes the notch in the rope marked Sixty."

It is worth noting that in the entire poem, "Sixty" is the only word capitalized, which makes it pop off the page. Clearly, Clifton is trying to emphasize turning sixty as a major

milestone; she seems to approach it with both longing and apprehension. The two views on ageing are contradictory, yet intricately related. Simplistically speaking, each year older is another year of learning and wisdom to tack onto one's "resume" of life. But by the same token, each year lived also brings one closer to death, leading to careful introspection, which, in turn, brings more wisdom.

Ultimately, the speaker in "Climbing" embraces the idea of aging. The last line of the poem confirms this: "i rise toward it, struggling, / hand over hungry hand." The speaker is rising toward the future with no regrets. The shades of self-doubt melt away in this final declaration. Her history has been one of struggle, and she has no intention of giving up the fight now. This final image of the hungry hand is reminiscent of the image of the bowl inside, "burning to be filled." The speaker's bowl is not yet filled. This is not, however, a bad thing. This desire for fulfillment is the very thing that keeps the speaker constantly pushing forward, constantly climbing. To fight injustice, to demand change, and to live a life one can proud of when one dies is no easy task, but, as this poem points out, it is well worth the struggle.

Source: Judi Ketteler, Critical Essay on "Climbing," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

New Letters on the Air distributes an audiocassette entitled *Lucille Clifton* with Clifton reading excerpts from her poetry (publication date unavailable).

Clifton reads her poetry on *The Place for Keeping*, an audiocassette distributed by Watershed Tapes (publication date unavailable).

Topics for Further Study

Write a descriptive essay speculating on what you will look like and how you will feel when you are sixty years old.

Research the subject of body image and aging, then present your findings to your class. Make sure to address the following questions: What about their bodies do women most pay attention to when aging? Is this different from what men pay attention to? How is body image related to race?

Take an informal poll of people over forty, asking them what they regret most in their lives. What similarities and differences do you see? Were most of the regrets for something they did not do or for something they did? What conclusions can you draw from your findings?

Draw a time line running from your birth to the age at which you believe you will die, marking it in five-year increments. Under each five-year mark, write a short description of what you did that year or what you believe you will be doing. What does this time line tell you about how you think of your past and your future?

Review three or four popular magazines such as *People*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Ebony*, paying careful attention to women's hairstyles. Are there any connections you can make about hairstyle and age, hairstyle and body type?

Research the cultural significance of hairstyles such as the Afro, the Mullet, the Mohawk, even the cleanly-shaved head, and report your findings to your class. Then lead a discussion on hairstyles, asking your classmates to explain what their hair says about who they are.

What Do I Read Next?

The 1973 anthology *The Poetry of Black America: Anthology of the 20th Century*, edited by Adoff Arnold and introduced by Gwendolyn Brooks, contains poems by Clifton and many other prominent African-American poets, including Amiri Baraka, Sam Cornish, Countee Cullen, and Sterling Allen Brown.

Clifton is also a writer of children's books. Her book, *Everett Anderson's 1-2-3* (1992), illustrated by Ann Grifalconi, tells the story of Everett Anderson, a young African-American boy living in the city, who comes to terms with his mother's new friend and grows up in the process.

Terry McMillan's 1992 blockbuster novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, chronicles the lives of four thirty-something black women, their romantic adventures, and their deep emotional bonds with one another. Adapted into a popular movie, this novel, in part, examines how these women respond to ageing.

Another popular McMillan novel, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996), explores the desires and choices of Stella Payne, a forty-something black woman who unexpectedly falls in love with a much younger man.

Further Study

Brown, Fahamisha Patricia, *Performing the Word: African- American Poetry as Vernacular Culture*, Rutgers University Press, 1999.

Poet and theorist Brown explores how poetry is a crucial agent for transmitting and preserving African-American vernacular culture.

Castells, Manuel, *End of Millennium*, Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

Castells details the social trends of the 1990s that are changing the way people think about themselves and one another. He describes the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of "informational capitalism," and the increasing growth of a "Fourth World," arguing that the moral order of the world is rapidly being redrawn.

hooks, bell, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, South End Press, 2000.

With accessible and concise language, hooks chronicles the feminist movement and explains how and why feminism struggles against patriarchal cultures. This is a passionate study that aims at unearthing the roots of gender oppression without gender bashing.

Roberts, Dorothy, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, Vintage Books, 1999.

Roberts, a professor at Rutgers University School of Law, takes a historical approach to examining African-American women's fight to gain control of their reproductive choice. This is a challenging text at points, but it provides a theory of how black women's relationship to their bodies has been configured by oppressive laws and social institutions.

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Walker, Alice, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

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BOOKRAGS

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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

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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