The Cobweb Study Guide

The Cobweb by Raymond Carver

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"The Cobweb" appears in Raymond Carver's 1986 collection of poems, *Ultramarine*, for which he received *Poetry* magazine's Levinson Award. The title of the collection comes from the book's epigraph, lines from Irish poet Derek Mahon's poem, "Mt. Gabriel," included in his collection, *Antarctica*:

Sick with exile, they yearn homeward now,
their eyes
Turned to the ultramarine, first-star-pierced dark
Reflected on the dark, incoming waves.

"Ultramarine Blue" is also a color listed under the section titled "Palette" in the second poem of the book, "What You Need for Painting." The title underscores the importance of both sky and sea as symbolic images appearing throughout the collection.

Carver is known for his storytelling, and he tells a story in this poem, albeit a short one. Carver's speaker, a thinly veiled version of Carver the author, recounts an experience in which he walks into a cobweb and then brings it back into his house, where he muses about it and reflects on how it, like life, is fragile. It is a brief poem, only thirteen lines, and written in short, choppy sentences, with a rhythm closer to prose than poetry. A meditation on his death and his own mortality, the poem is significant, for it was written only a few years before Carver succumbed to cancer in 1988. More than likely the poem was written in Port Angeles, Washington, at Sky House, the home of his future wife, Tess Gallagher. Carver spent a good deal of time there during the mid-1980s writing poems and stories.

Author Biography

Raymond Carver was born May 25, 1938, to Clevie Raymond Carver and Ella Beatrice Casey in the tiny logging town of Clatskanie, Oregon, population seven hundred. Carver's parents were working- class poor and often struggled to make ends meet. His father, an alcoholic saw filer in a sawmill, had a nervous breakdown in 1957, the same year that Raymond married sixteen-year-old Maryann Burk and they had their first child. Carver's adult life eerily mirrored that of his father's: he drank heavily, worked at a series of menial, low-paying jobs, including one in a sawmill, and moved his family from city to city, always hunting for better opportunities. His impoverished and often desperate circumstances, however, also provided Carver with the subject matter for his poems and stories. Apart from his family and his own experience, Carver credits novelist John Gardner, with whom Carver studied at Chico State College in 1959, as the most important influence on his writing. Gardner showed a keen interest in Carver's work and encouraged him to be more disciplined in his writing. Carver also claims Ernest Hemingway, Leo Tolstoy, Gustav Flaubert, and especially Anton Chekhov as literary influences.

Carver graduated in 1963 with a degree in English from Humboldt State University in California and then moved his family to Iowa City to begin graduate work in the Iowa Writer's Workshop. Although Carver was famous for his short stories, his early success as a writer came from his poetry. In 1970, he was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Discovery Award for poetry and his first book, *Winter Insomnia*, was published. In 1977, the year Carver stopped drinking, Carver met Tess Gallagher, a poet and fiction writer, who eventually became his second wife. Gallagher's encouragement helped Carver stay sober, and the next ten years proved to be the most productive writing years of his life. In addition to the short-story collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*? (1976), which was nominated for a National Book Award, Carver published *Furious Seasons and Other Stories* (1977); *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981); *Cathedral* (1983), nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award and runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize; and *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). His poetry collections include *Ultramarine* (1986) and *Where Water Comes Together With Other Water* (1985), as well as the posthumously published *All of Us* (1998) and *A New Path to the Waterfall* (1989).

In 1983, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters granted Carver one of its first Mildred and Harold Strauss "Living" awards, freeing him from teaching so he could concentrate on his writing. Carver produced some of his finest writing during the next few years, including the haunting poem, "The Cobweb," and a short story about Chekhov's death, "The Errand," his last published piece. In 1987, Carver experienced pulmonary hemorrhages and had two-thirds of his cancerous left lung removed. In 1988, the cancer resurfaced, and on August 2, Carver died in the new house he and Gallagher had bought just east of Port Angeles, Washington.

Poem Text

A few minutes ago, I stepped onto the deck
of the house. From there I could see and hear the water,
and everything that's happened to me all these years.
It was hot and still. The tide was out.
No birds sang. As I leaned against the railing
a cobweb touched my forehead.
It caught in my hair. No one can blame me that I turned
and went inside. There was no wind. The sea
was dead calm. I hung the cobweb from the lampshade.
Where I watch it shudder now and then when my breath
touches it. A fine thread. Intricate.
Before long, before anyone realizes,
I'll be gone from here.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-3

"The Cobweb" is a disarmingly simple poem written in free verse. Carver relies on the rhythm of sentences, rather than any fixed meter or rhyme scheme. Because Carver's poems, especially his later ones, carry a good deal of autobiographical information in them, knowledge of his life increases a reader's appreciation of the poem. The poem could be set anywhere near water, but from Carver and Gallagher's essays, letters, and other writings released after his death, Carver fans know that the poems were written in Port Angeles, Washington, in a house near the water. When the speaker steps onto the deck and says, "From there I could see and hear the water, / and everything that's happened to me all these years," readers understand that he's referring to the difficult and painful life he had while a struggling writer and an alcoholic. Carver is using "seeing" in this instance figuratively. This means that he cannot literally see his past but that the setting and the time that has passed have provided him a perspective from which he can better understand how far he has come and how much he has changed.

Lines 4-6

In these lines, Carver employs short, declarative sentences describing the weather. The "hot and still" air and the quiet evoke a feeling of emptiness and calm, suggesting the speaker's own reflective state of mind. Leaning into a cobweb underscores the fact that he is paying more attention to what is happening inside of him than outside. Cobwebs can be symbolic of confusion, of being caught in something from which one cannot escape. Once the image is introduced, readers expect more information about it.

Lines 7-9

In these lines, the speaker moves inside, itself symbolic of the attention he is paying to the incident's effect on his own inner emotional life and memory. This is highlighted in the odd statement, "No one can blame me that I turned / and went inside." Who would blame him? There does not appear to be anyone around watching him. Something else is happening to the speaker that he leaves unsaid. If it is perfectly natural to go inside to untangle the spider web, why even mention it?

Once inside, the speaker focuses on the stillness of the day, how windless and calm it is, "dead calm." It would have to be calm in order for a cobweb to remain intact. Mentioning the weather again is odd, given that the speaker is now indoors. Doing so suggests that the speaker is using the description of the weather to actually comment on his "internal weather," that is, his emotional state.

The gesture of hanging the cobweb from the lampshade befits a man who is tender and thoughtful. He is not saving a spider; rather, he is using the cobweb as an object on which he can meditate and which can be used as a symbol for his own life.

Lines 10-13

In these lines, the speaker is inside the house, breathing on the cobweb, studying how it responds to his breath. That the web "shudders" tells readers he must be pretty close to it. Again, Carver uses short sentences, fragments, to describe the cobweb. By using longer and shorter sentences, Carver creates a rhythm suggestive of the sea's tides, his breath, and the physical composition of the web itself. Its fragility and intricacy also suggest the fragility and intricacy of human life. This comparison is subtly underlined in the poem's last two lines when the speaker states, "Before long, before anyone realizes, / I'll be gone from here." This rumination on death became reality just two years after the publication of the collection in which the poem appears. Carver's obsession with his own mortality is evident not only in "The Cobweb" but in many of the other poems in *Ultramarine*.

Themes

Mortality

Many writers and artists often claim that their work can give them a kind of immortality. The poems in *Ultramarine*, written in a short period of time, just a few years before Carver's own death, all evoke the speaker's awareness of his inevitable death. There's nothing subtle about this awareness in "The Cobweb." Human beings die. Everyone knows this. What is startling, however, is the suddenness with which the speaker acknowledges his own impending death, after what seems an innocent description of a rather mundane experience with a cobweb. When the speaker announces, "Before long, before anyone realizes, / I'll be gone from here," readers understand that he's not referring to leaving on a vacation, but to dying. The poem has gained an added poignancy since Carver's death in 1988, making it seem prophetic. If Carver were still alive, readers would consider it just one more poetic musing on the brevity of life.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a kind of homesickness for the past, a mood thick with feelings of melancholy, longing, and often regret. Carver expresses nostalgia when he refers to "everything that's happened to me all these years." Readers are not told what these "things" are, but they feel the speaker's reflective mood and can infer that these "things" are significant. The calmness of the water and the absence of wind form an appropriate setting for the speaker's reflection, as he does not have to contend with the elements but, instead, can focus on his memories and his response to them.

The speaker's nostalgia is also tinged with regret. Carver illustrates this when the speaker says, "No one can blame me that I turned / and went inside." As the speaker is alone, the only person watching him is himself. This split consciousness, of the self watching the self, suggests that a part of the speaker feels remorse or guilt for "everything that's happened to me all these years."

Romanticism

Humanity's difference from and similarity to the natural world is a familiar theme in much po- etry, especially romantic poetry. For romantics, nature is the source of inspiration and goodness. Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth often used observations of nature as occasion for reflecting on the human condition and the subjective experience of the individual "self." Carver's poem is written in this tradition, as his speaker uses his encounter with nature□represented by the water, the sea, and the cobweb□as an opportunity to dwell on his past and his own mortality. Romantics also privilege the idea of spontaneity in composition, which Carver's poem embodies in its casual opening, conversational tone, and "surprise ending."

Style

Symbol

Symbols are things or actions that suggest or stand for something else. The "something else" is often a range of interrelated attitudes, emotions, or ideas. Symbols can also be private or public. Public symbols have a range of associations accessible to many readers. Most Western readers understand, for example, that a rose can signify love, lust, passion, and beauty. Private symbols are often peculiar to a particular writer and so are not as accessible, especially for readers unfamiliar with that writer's work. Carver's spider web and the sea are public symbols. The cobweb is often associated with ideas of both creation (spinning a web) and death, how a spider traps its prey, while the sea has a wide range of symbolic associations, chief among them are ideas of life and death. The sea, like life, is constantly in flux, at once changing and the same. The ocean sustains much life and is often referred to as "the mother of life." To return to the sea is to return to the mother and to that which one was before life.

Anecdote

An anecdote is a short, informal story that relates an event or idea. Many of Carver's poems are anecdotal in that he tells stories that also carry a moral punch or an emotional weight beyond their surface description. Critics sometimes fault contemporary poetry for being *too* anecdotal and for not distinguishing itself enough as poetry. Other prominent late-twentieth-century poets who use an anecdotal style include Charles Bukowski, Stephen Dunn, Louis Simpson, and Sharon Olds.

Understatement

Writers use understatement to suggest, rather than to explicitly express, an idea or emotion. They often accomplish this through the use of images and remarks that appear to be casual or off-handed but that hint at something deeper. Carver's speaker never comes out and says that he is experiencing an overwhelming sense of loss and foreboding, but that is what the images in the poem suggest, as does the leap, an unexpected concept or phrase, embodied in the last two lines. Understatement is the opposite of hyperbole, which is a form of exaggeration and embellishment.

Historical Context

In 1983, Carver published *Cathedral*, his bestknown collection of short stories, which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. That same year the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters awarded Carver its first Mildred and Harold Strauss Living Award, freeing him from having to teach for a living. Carver quit his job at Syracuse University and moved to Port Angeles, Washington, and at the beginning of 1984, he wrote the collection of poems *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water*. Carver wrote the poems in *Ultramarine* between September 1984 and March 1985 in an unexpected burst of creative energy, after he and Gallagher returned from Brazil and Argentina on a trip sponsored by the United States Information Service. Carver had clearly established himself as a leading voice in American fiction, and his style of writing was widely imitated. Critics often lumped Carver's fiction in with that of other writers such as Bobbie Ann Mason, Ann Beattie, Tobias Wolfe, Frederick Barthelme, and Mary Robison, pejoratively calling their "brand" of fiction "Kmart realism," to denote the writers' emphasis on characters who struggled economically, smoked and drank, ate fast food, and shopped at discount stores in lower-middle-class suburbs. These writers also often sprinkled their prose with brand names of consumer products, emphasizing not only the tastes of their characters but the consumer culture in which they are locked.

The political landscape of America during this period was dominated by President Ronald Reagan's conservative fiscal and social policies. The Economic Recovery Act of 1981 reduced taxes by 23 percent and pegged tax rates to inflation. Between 1981 and 1986, corporations saved almost $150 billion in tax reductions. Social critics dubbed the 1980s the "Me Generation" because of Americans' (especially baby boomers') emphasis on making money and acquiring brand-name goods and the media's emphasis on corporate culture celebrities such as Donald Trump, Leona Helmsley, and Ivan Boesky.

Reagan's cold war rhetoric during the 1980s no doubt contributed to the popularity of espionage writers such as Ken Follett, Robert Ludlum, Frederick Forsyth, Martin Cruz Smith, Tom Clancy, and John le Carre, all considered writers of "popular" rather than "literary" fiction like Carver's. Other well-known novelists of the decade include Stephen King, Danielle Steele, Tom Wolfe, Toni Morrison, Larry McMurtry, James Michener, John Irving, and Alice Walker. In poetry, the 1980s witnessed the re-emergence of narrative and formal poetry on one hand and the increasing practice of what has been labeled language poetry on the other hand. Regarding the former, presses such as Story Line Press, founded by maverick poet and critic Robert McDowell, published and promoted works by writers such as Louis Simpson, Donald Hall, and Weldon Kees, offering their work as accessible alternatives to what McDowell sees as the dominant influence of the insular and claustrophobic lyric, the kind of poem most practiced and published by graduates of creative writing programs. Language poetry, which some see as a natural extension of the rise of literary theory (especially French literary theory) in the academy in the 1970s, questioned the notion that language could ever be anything but self-referential. Language poets such as Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, and Bob Perleman treat language as a material substance, much like cotton or wood, and

compose poems that often baffle readers unfamiliar with the theoretical assumptions underpinning their poems and challenge the idea that language could ever be transparent.

Critical Overview

Ultramarine was widely praised when it was released in 1986. Reviewing the collection for the *New York Times Book Review* in 1987, Patricia Hampl wrote, "This book is a treasure, one to return to. No one's brevity is as rich, as complete, as Raymond Carver's." Although academic criticism of Carver's writing focuses on his fiction rather than his poetry, a few critics have addressed the poems in *Ultramarine*, and interest is likely to increase over time. In his study of Carver's writing, *Raymond Carver*, Adam Meyer calls Carver "a poet of considerable skill" and argues that "The Cobweb" is a projection of his own death. "Carver produced poems that are deserving of much more attention than they have received to date," Meyer writes, noting that critical interest in Carver's poetry is "primarily for its similarities to and difference from his fiction." In his own study of Carver's writing, *Reading Raymond Carver*, Randolph Paul Runyon calls the poems in *Ultramarine* "metafictional," meaning that they comment on themselves as much as the world outside. Runyon argues that many of the poems are about Carver's willing himself to focus on the here and now and not the past. Runyon writes:

> *Ultramarine* has the kind of unity one would expect from a collection of poems written in a short space of time and meant to appear together in a sequence. . . . it has an integration that rivals that of the three major story collections [Carver has written].

In a 1986 interview with Roxanne Lawler, "Carver's World," Carver says about *Ultramarine*: "I feel like I haven't written any better poems."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of literature and composition. In this essay, Semansky considers the idea of vision in Carver's poem.

Like many of Carver's poems and stories, "The Cobweb" uses visual imagery to suggest the emotional depth of its main character. Through his encounter with the cobweb, the speaker moves from sight to insight, undergoing a transformation in which he recognizes the complexity, yet brevity, of his own life. By using the physical world to evoke the unseen world of the heart, Carver achieves what his best work always has: a vision of the smallness of the self in relation to the processes of nature and time.

It is Carver's voice, more than anything, that reaches readers, convinces them of the truth in his observations. This is in large part because of the casual way that Carver's speaker recounts his experience: it is as if he is at a party or having coffee with a friend. He creates intimacy and wins readers' trust by detailing the experience, rather than speaking about it in general terms. It occurred "a few minutes ago" on "the deck / of the house." He then retreats into a generalization when he says, "From there I could see and hear the water, / and everything that's happened to me all these years." This is the rhythm of conversation, the way people talk in the course of their everyday lives, unconsciously moving between observation and reflection. It is not fancy or poetic or pretending to be full of hidden meaning. The "everything" could, in fact, be anything. Readers not familiar with Carver's personal life can fill in the blank and imagine what that "everything" might be, using their own experiences. That is the beauty of Carver's poem: what he leaves unsaid.

In an interview with Nicholas O'Connell, Carver said before he began writing the poems that constitute *When Water Comes Together with Other Water* and *Ultramarine*, that he believed he would never write poetry again, but

> they [the poems] allowed me to satisfy my storytelling instinct; most of the poems in there have a narrative line to them. And it was wonderful to write them; there was just nothing else like it. And I did it because I wanted to, which is the best reason for doing anything.

That is Carver the realist speaking, the plainspeaking hunter and fisherman who had little time for the "why" of writing and was more interested in the "what" and the "how." In another interview, this one with John Alton, Carver says that his poems never start with ideas. "I always see something," he says:

> I start with an image, a cigarette being put out in a jar of mustard, for instance, or the remains, the wreckage, of a dinner left on the table. Pop cans in the fireplace, that sort of thing.

The examples Carver gives Alton are all domestic images, indoor things. It is significant that Carver sets many of his poems and stories indoors rather than outdoors, though he considered himself a lover of the great outdoors. Even the cobweb, which he encounters on the "deck / of the house," must come indoors before it can cause a change in the consciousness of the poem's speaker. This relationship between indoors and outdoors in the poem parallels the relationships between sight and insight, the physical and the emotional, self and other. Although Carver prides himself on "fundamental accuracy of statement," what Ezra Pound claimed is "the ONE sole morality of writing," his statements are not void of figurative language or suggestion; his words mean more than what they describe. For example, Carver uses a list of outdoor images to evoke emptiness and a kind of existential void: "It was hot and still. The tide was out. / No birds sang." And, after becoming entangled with the web, the speaker says: "There was no wind. The sea / was dead calm." However, rather than commenting on the idea of nothingness and death that the images suggest, the speaker takes action, hanging the web from a lampshade and watching "it shudder now and then when my breath / touches it. A fine thread. Intricate." These descriptions are both literal, that is, they accurately describe the physical attributes of the web and the speaker's actions, and figurative, in that they also describe the nature of human life. But Carver does not use metaphor to accomplish this; he does not write, "My life is a cobweb, fine and intricate." Rather, he employs a stacking strategy, letting the images accrue meaning as he places them near one another. In this way, the images become symbolic; even though the surface of Carver's poem is realistic, the undercurrent resonates with other meaning. In his essay "On Writing," in *Fires*, Carver writes:

> It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things□a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring□with immense, even startling power.

Although it is what Carver does not say that makes "The Cobweb" successful, it is also what he *does* say, particularly in the last two lines of the poem, that makes the poem poignant. For whereas the description of the speaker's encounter with the cobweb is a relatively commonplace occurrence, the speaker's realization of his own impending death is surprising. It is this leap between the description of the event and the insight it engenders that is so characteristic of Carver's style and vision. The last image, of the speaker breathing on the web under the light, is a perfect lead-in to the last two lines, as it employs the symbolic imagery of light and breath to underscore the fragility of life.

In his essay "On Bobber and Other Poems," included in his collection of uncollected prose and fiction, *Call If You Need Me*, Carver writes that he remembers the occasion surrounding the writing of his poems better than those surrounding his stories:

> I feel the poems are closer to me, more special, more of a gift received than my other work, even though I know, for sure, that the stories are no less a gift. It

could be that I put a more intimate value finally on the poems than I do the stories.

Carver acknowledges, as do many other writers about their own work, that although there are autobiographical elements in his poems and that they spring from specific occasions, they are not literal renderings of those occasions. Rather, he takes the raw material from which the poem arises and shapes it to fit the emotional truth from which it springs. Carver's "vision" is deeply tied to his notions of poetry's purpose. "They are always about something," he writes, adding that when he reads over his poems, he is "looking back over a rough, but true map of my past." Carver's poems, however, are more than simply chronicles of his own past; they also comment on the human condition, on how one person's life and pain illustrate many people's lives and pain.

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

Critical Essay #2

Wallace is a freelance writer and poet. In this essay, Wallace details Carver's use of seemingly meaningless details to reveal emotional truth as he attempts to take in the scope of a troubled life.

Carver was a man with much to celebrate and much to regret. Perhaps more than any other American writer since Hemingway, his life story is legendary: born in an Oregon mining town, Carver grew up in a blue-collar family in the American West, with big dreams of making it as an author. But, marriage at age nineteen, and the birth of his first daughter six months later, put those dreams on hold. By the time he was 20, Carver was a father of two and struggling to support his family while beginning his education as a freshman at California's Chico State University. His course of study in creative writing did pay off, with a number of early publications in small but significant "little magazines" and a growing literary reputation. By the time his first book of stories appeared in 1976, alcoholism had largely destroyed both his fifteenyear marriage and his writing.

Unlike so many stories with similar openings, Carver's does not end there, but continues, with both personal and professional redemption. In 1977, spurred on by the offer of a book contract from McGraw-Hill, Carver quit drinking, for good. Five months later, at a writer's conference, he met Tess Gallagher, a poet who would be a life companion and a significant stabilizing influence for the next ten years□and, finally, his second wife.

Sober, Carver set to work on a body of short stories that established him as a master of that craft in the second half of the twentieth century. Although his poems are less well known than his short stories, he also devoted a great deal of energy to them. In fact, his first published book was not of short stories, but poems, and he joked once that it would be enough for him if, on his gravestone, his loved ones simply engraved "Poet." Carver's stories are known for their spare focus on one perfectly- drawn subject, but his poems, while they share simplicity of language with his prose, were more clearly autobiographical, often with somewhat larger scope. In "The Cobweb," which was published originally in *Ultramarine* (1986), a book that Carver completed after a trip to South America with Gallagher, he looks back on his life.

One of the distinctive points of Carver's prose is the indirect nature with which he approaches his subjects; in Carver's work, revelation tends to sneak up on both characters and reader from nowhere, often when they least expect it. The same thing is true in "The Cobweb." In the poem, the speaker has gone out "onto the deck / of the house," where he can see and hear "the water," which he might expect. But, the next line changes the stakes dramatically, adding that, along with the water, the speaker can also see "everything that's happened to me all these years." This line has a powerful effect on the reader, operating very much like the memories that sometimes rush in on people when they least expect them□often in quiet moments like the one that the speaker has been describing. It is not clear from the poem whether the speaker is surprised. The first three lines leave room for interpretation: the memories may have

come unbidden, or the speaker may have gone out of the house looking for them, intentionally. One possible reading, in light of Carver's recent trip to South America, which strongly influenced other parts of *Ultramarine*, is that Carver's distance from his homeland (for which stepping "onto the deck of the house" might be a metaphor) allowed him a new vantage point from which to write about someone looking back over his life.

Whether the speaker is surprised or has sought the vision deliberately, he holds steady, avoiding directly describing the very thing that the reader now wants to see: the "everything" of his life that has spread out before him. The general sense of the description he does give is of loss and helplessness: "It was hot and still. The tide was out. / No birds sang." In these lines, the tide and birds, the only two physical objects that Carver mentions, are both absent; they are things that used to be there, and now are not. Both are also forces of nature that are notoriously outside of man's control. Behind them, they have left nothing but silence. In this landscape of water and memory, the speaker is the only thing moving, and only barely, as if trying to make it out of the room without waking anybody. If he is careful, he might make it out clean.

But that is not to be. As the speaker leans against the railing (perhaps for support, perhaps to get a better look), a cobweb touches his forehead□the first action by anything other than the speaker in the entire poem to this point. The cobweb is a familiar symbol□from high art to Halloween decorations, it appears as a sign of things forgotten or left behind. In its association with spiders, the cobweb is somewhat threatening. The one the speaker brushes against is inescapable: no sooner has it touched his forehead than it becomes caught in his hair.

The past that the speaker has been gazing out upon has suddenly crept up onto the deck, and quite literally, caught the speaker in its web. In response, Carver offers the first statement of opinion in a poem which, until this point, has been entirely description. "No one can blame me," he says, "that I turned and went inside." In his denial of anyone's right to blame him, the speaker implies that someone might, admitting at least the possibility of his guilt in turning away. Carver adds two more lines of description, as if to give the speaker a defense, further images of absence and silence: "There was no wind. The sea / was dead calm." There was nothing, really, out there to see, Carver seems to say. Why should anyone blame the speaker for turning away?

By this point, however, caught by the cobweb, the speaker cannot escape. The two lines of description in the speaker's defense also serve to point out the fact that, even after he goes inside, nothing changes. His past, in the form of the cobweb, has followed him in. In fact, the shift between Carver's initial description of the speaker's life as something he can look down on from the deck, and its later incarnation as the cobweb may be significant. The shift may constitute an admission on the speaker's part that, while he wishes the past were something he could remain detached from, it is actually far more like the cobweb: unavoidable, clinging.

The fact that the speaker cannot loose himself from the cobweb forces him, finally, to look directly at it. Deliberately, he settles the cobweb on the lampshade, where he will

"watch it shudder" under his breath as if it has some life of its own as opposed to the "everything that's happened to me" of the early part of the poem, which the speaker can only "see." Again, even inside, the speaker is the only thing that is moving, and again, his movements are minimal. They have a profound effect on the cobweb, which "shudders" now and then, when the speaker's breath "touches it." Interestingly, in a poem in which both movement and word choice are extremely constrained, Carver uses "touch" again, linking the current action of the speaker's breath against the cobweb back to the initial contact of the cobweb against the speaker's forehead: the pattern of his life has affected him, seemingly without his permission, but he also can affect it. On an even deeper level, Carver may be commenting on the role memory plays in reshaping the events of a person's life as they appear in his mind. The cobweb which now represents everything that has happened to the speaker does not come to pieces, but the speaker's presence does disturb it.

In fact, the cobweb as a symbol of the past even offers some hope for the future. Although Carver begins the poem with profound feelings of emptiness and stasis associated with the past, by the end, after it touches the speaker (whether the speaker allows it or it clings to him unbidden), he is able to remove it from his person, looking clearly at it, and in that way he still affects it. In carrying the cobweb, the speaker succeeds in preserving his history, and therefore his essence, even as he crosses boundaries from one space or phase of life to the next. Finally, although the cobweb at first made him turn away from the view of his life that he commanded from the deck, Carver pronounces his judgement of the cobweb as positive: "A fine thread. Intricate."

Then, jarringly, Carver closes the poem with what sounds like a threat: "Before long, before anyone realizes / I'll be gone from here." Is the speaker unhappy with the life he has created? Is he simply unable, despite the steps he has taken over the course of the poem, to really look directly at "everything that's happened" for long? Or, is he predicting yet another transformation in his life, one so profound that he will leave the emptiness and silence of his past life behind for another life completely? Good arguments could be made for any of these interpretations, but the most obvious, and probably best reading of the final lines of "The Cobweb" is that, in them, the speaker predicts his own death.

Along with the warning that he will be gone soon, Carver offers a final lesson, the same one that he teaches again and again through the indirect way he reveals truth in both his poems and prose. When truth arrives in Carver's work, it is revealed indirectly, when least expected. With the line "before anyone realizes / I'll be gone from here," he contends that death will not be any different. It will arrive just like a sudden rush of memories and will be as impossible to escape as an unnoticed cobweb, which first brushes against one's forehead, then catches in one's hair.

Still, Carver's poem is not hopeless. In the lines just before the final lines, he has pronounced the pattern of the speaker's life, in the form of the cobweb to be, in his estimation, "fine" and "intricate." The final sense of "The Cobweb" is that the speaker, although deeply ambivalent about some of his past, is pleased with the entire pattern.

Source: Carey Wallace, Critical Essay on "The Cobweb," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

Sakuda holds a bachelor of arts degree in communications and is an independent writer. In this essay, Sakuda discusses how Carver's description of common objects and everyday events invites the reader to explore life's deeper meanings.

Carver is perhaps more known for his collections of short stories rather than his poems. However, his third volume of poetry, *Ultramarine* was published in 1986 and received critical acclaim. This anthology conveys themes of love, nature, gratitude, and death using free verse poems about seemingly simple objects and moments in time. While the volume contains vibrant, rich, and healing poems, "The Cobweb" illustrates Carver reflecting on his imminent death. Instead of sadness, "The Cobweb" conveys a meditative quality. Carver's style of using few words to convey a depth of meaning keeps the poem from sounding morbid or melancholy. Critics often describe Carver as a minimalist who creates art out of everyday experiences. Adam Meyer notes in his book, *Raymond Carver*, that Carver learned to use the language of common people and to eliminate unnecessary verbiage early in his career. Carver uses the poem "The Cobweb" as an invitation to reflect on one's life. The poem is also an example of Carver's unique writing style. While sparse, Carver's writing is not unsophisticated. Roxanne Lawler's article, "Carver's World," in *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, quotes Carver describing his writing this way, "I place a high premium on clarity and simplicity, not simplemindedness which is quite different."

Carver was born in 1938 in Clatskanie, Oregon to working class parents. During Carver's formative years, the family moved frequently and worked hard just to make ends meet. The situation was made worse by Carver's father's addiction to alcohol. At nineteen, Carver married his sixteenyear- old, pregnant, high school sweetheart, Maryann Burk. By the time he was 20, Carver was supporting his wife and two children, finishing college, and finding work as a writer. Financial hardships and marital strife took their toll on Carver and he soon followed in his father's footsteps of alcohol abuse. Despite these setbacks, Carver continued to write and was critically acclaimed for both his poetry and short stories. He also continued to drink heavily, and he was hospitalized several times for acute alcoholism. Carver and his wife separated several times and eventually divorced.

On June 2, 1977, Carver took his last drink. In the days leading up to his decision to quit drinking, Carver felt he had hit rock-bottom. Bruce Weber's article, "Raymond Carver: A Chronicler of Blue Collar Despair," in, *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, edited by Marshall Bruce Gentry and William Stull, quotes Carver as saying,

> For all intents and purposes, I was finished as a writer and as a viable, functioning male. It was over for me. That's why I can speak of two lives, that life and this life.

Carver saw that June day as a dividing line between his two very different lives, lives that were separate but entwined—much like a cobweb is made of entwined, silken fibers. Carver did not forget his earlier, alcoholic life; he overcame it. Later in 1979, Carver began living with the poet Tess Gallagher. They married in 1988. Unfortunately, Carver's happiness was short-lived. He died of lung cancer in 1988.

It was during Carver's second life that he was able to write the poems in *Ultramarine*. "These poems expressed, among other things, a thankfulness even for his trials, and for having been delivered into a life he considered happy," says Tess Gallagher in the forward to *All of Us*. While the poems in *Ultramarine* are more upbeat than in previous collections, Carver's style of employing common objects and everyday situations to explain deeper meanings is still evident. The simple elements of water, a cobweb, a lampshade, and a human breath are woven together to create a thoughtful poem about the complexities of life, death, and human relationships.

Written before he was diagnosed with cancer, Carver uses the poem "The Cobweb" to ponder life and his own eventual death. The speaker of the poem steps out to the deck of his house to: "see and hear the water, / and everything that's happened to me all these years." This unassuming moment of watching water is infused with the significance of reflection on one's life. Carver goes on to simply describe what the speaker sees and feels and hears: "It was hot and still. The tide was out. / No birds sang." Through his spare, but descriptive text, Carver invites the reader to stop and enter this moment of time on a hot, still, quiet day, a calm moment where there is no movement. A moment made for reflection. As Stephen Dobyns writes in Randolph Runyon's book *Reading Raymond Carver*

"I can think of no contemporary American poet who could locate this sort of small yet intensely emotional moment as well as Ray could. They are the moments we mostly don't have time for. Unfortunately, they are also the moments that give life its significance."

Carver goes on to tell the reader: "As I leaned against the railing / a cobweb touched my forehead. It caught my hair." Cobwebs are the stuff of spiders, dirt and decay. Now, one is stuck in the speaker's hair. Readers are mesmerized. Carver uses this cobweb to bring tension to the poem. It gives the reader a vivid and ironic picture of the speaker standing on a windless day overlooking a "dead calm" sea with a cobweb on his hair. As Michael Schumacher writes in his article, "After the Fire, Into the Fire: An Interview with Raymond Carver" in *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, edited by Marshall Bruce Gentry and William Stull, "Carver's poems are dynamic and compressed, with each word a carefully chosen tool used to stretch tension to near-breaking point."

Instead of brushing the cobweb from his head, the speaker welcomes it. He does not shy away from this dusty, dirty bundle as it clings to his hair. Instead, he carefully walks inside and hangs the cobweb from a lampshade, "Where [he] watch[es] it shudder now and then when [his] breath touches it." Carver turns this simple cobweb into a metaphor for the speaker's life. While a cobweb is often seen as a distasteful thing, like drinking,

the speaker does not destroy it. He gently moves it to a place of safety; a place where he continues to reflect on this cobweb of his life. Carver often spoke of his two separate lives, and while he found happiness in his second life, he never shied away from the memories of his first life. He carried those experiences with him and used them to shape his later poems and short stories. In her *New York Times Book Review* of *Ultramarine*, Patricia Hampl writes of Carver, "He has the astonished, chastened voice of a person who has survived a wreck, as surprised that he had a life before as that he has a life afterward; willing to remember both sides."

A cobweb entangles, obscures, or confuses. In his poem, Carver describes the cobweb as "A fine thread. Intricate." Again, Carver gives us another view of this seemingly simple cobweb. No longer does the reader see this as a dusty, decaying bundle, but as a complex weaving of delicate strands. People's lives are like that□woven over time. Del- icate strands link people to experiences and relationships. Through his description of the cobweb, Carver illustrates how tenuous these connections are that link people to relationships with others. These relationships can confuse and entangle. People can get caught up in the cobwebs of their own lives.

The last lines of "The Cobweb" are direct and get to the heart of this poem: "Before long, before anyone realizes, / I'll be gone from here." The speaker is contemplating his own death. While dramatic, these lines do not convey a sense of dread or of panic. They have a meditative quality. Carver's unaffected words are calming as the speaker reflects on his life in this quiet moment. "He was the celebrator of those small occasions of fragile contentment, of time lived instead of time passing," says Stephen Dobyns in Runyon's *Reading Raymond Carver*. Even though this poem speaks of death, Carver's use of language imparts an air of solemnity, not sadness. Carver invites the reader to reflect on the complexities of life as the speaker's breath expands and contracts the fragile cobweb.

Carver's direct but descriptive language and subject matter invite readers of all backgrounds to examine his poems. He writes of everyday things: going to get groceries, his car, mail, and getting cobwebs caught in one's hair, but the meditative quality of these poems invites the reader to examine their deeper meaning. Again, Stephen Dobyns reflects on Carver's poems in Runyon's *Reading Raymond Carver*: "They are not a critic's poems. They are not decorative. They need no one to interpret them. They are a reader's poems. They exist to define moments of emotion and wonder." Through its simple phrasing and modest descriptions, "The Cobweb" shows the reader a wonderful snapshot of Carver's unaffected style. A style that appears simple on the surface but is never simple-minded in its depth of meaning.

Source: Tamara Sakuda, Critical Essay on "The Cobweb," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Adaptations

Director Robert Altman adapted a number of Carver's stories for the screen in the motion picture *Short Cuts* (1993), available in most video stores and many libraries.

PBS Seattle television station KCTS has released a documentary of Carver's life called *To Write and Keep Kind*.

In 1983, American Audio Prose Library released an audio cassette of Carver reading his stories, including "Nobody Said Anything" and "Fat."

Topics for Further Study

Complete this exercise in small groups. Assume you have only two years to live. Write your own obituary and then have each group member also write an obituary for you. What differences do you notice between your description of your life and your group members' descriptions? Explain what this tells you about how you see yourself and how others see you?

Write an essay about how you would live the last two years of your life if you knew you had only two years to live. Read the essay to your class.

Make a timeline of your life's most significant events, both bad and good, and then show the timeline to family members or close friends. Do any of the events surprise them? Do they have suggestions to include?

Write a short essay arguing for how Carver's poem might be read as an expression of regret.

In groups, compose a poster of one or more themes that "The Cobweb" addresses. Use any materials, including paint, markers, cutout images from magazines, and so forth. However, do not include an image of a human being or an image of a cobweb in the poster. Present your poster to your class, explaining why it looks the way it does.

Make a list of all the poems in *Ultramarine* about mortality and then rank each poem according to how closely it expresses your own feelings about the subject. Share your rankings with other students. Are there poems you included that they did not? Make a case for your own choices

Compare and Contrast

1980s: In 1983, smoker Rose Cipollone, dying of lung cancer, sues the Liggett Group for not warning her that their products were dangerous. She wins a $400,000 judgment against the company, but it is overturned on appeal.

Today: In 2000, a jury orders the tobacco industry to pay $145 billion in punitive damages to sick Florida smokers, a record-setting verdict.

1980s: In 1986, the life expectancy for white males in the United States is 71.9 years.

Today: In 1997, the life expectancy for white males in the United States is 74.3 years.

1980s: In 1981, to address a deepening economic recession, the House passes the Economic Recovery Act, reducing taxes by 23 percent and pegging tax rates to inflation.

Today: In 2001, to address a deepening economic recession, the House passes an elevenyear $1.35 trillion tax cut, reducing tax rates and the marriage penalty.

1980s: The largest stock-market drop in Wall Street history occurs on "Black Monday"□October 19, 1987, when the Dow Jones Industrial Average plunges 508.32 points, losing 22.6 percent of its total value.

Today: The great bull market of the 1980s and 1990s comes to an end, as technology stocks lead the markets lower and the United States sinks into a recession. Analysts place much of the blame on the "bubble" (i.e., inflated prices) on the public's infatuation with technology stocks and on the rise of Internet stock trading.

What Do I Read Next?

Frederick Barthelme's 1983 short story collection, *Moon Deluxe*, features characters from the Deep South who live alienated suburban lives spent shopping and drifting aimlessly. Barthelme, like Carver, has been labeled a minimalist and practitioner of "Kmart realism."

Carver Country: The World of Raymond Carver (1990), with photographs by Bob Adelman, presents photographs of places where Carver grew up and lived, accompanied by text from Carver's poems and stories.

Some of Carver's best-known short stories are collected in *Cathedral*, published in 1983.

Some critics believe Carver's 1985 collection of poems, *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water*, is his strongest collection.

No Heroics Please, published in 1991, collects Carver's unpublished stories, reviews, and other uncollected prose.

Tess Gallagher's 1996 collection of poems, *Portable Kisses*, is a collection of fine love poems, many of them inspired by her relationship with Carver.

Another practitioner of "Kmart realism" is Bobbie Ann Mason, whose short-story collection, *Shiloh and Other Stories* won the 1982 PEN/Hemingway Award for Fiction and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the American Book Award, and the PEN/Faulkner Award.

Arthur Saltzman's 1988 book, *Understanding Raymond Carver*, though brief, is the first fulllength study of Carver's writing and remains a useful introduction to his work.

Further Study

Gentry, Marshall Bruce, and William L. Stull, eds., *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, University Press of Mississippi, 1990.

This is the most comprehensive collection of interviews with Carver. In them, Carver discusses his life before and after alcohol, his craft, and his writing habits.

Halpert, Sam, ed., *What We Talk about When We Talk about Raymond Carver*, Gibbs Smith, 1991.

Halpert collects interviews with those who were closest to Carver. Halpert's book remains one of the best sources of biographical and critical information about Carver and his writing.

Meyer, Adam, *Raymond Carver*, Twayne, 1995.

Meyer provides a thorough and useful introduction to Carver's work, though he focuses, like most Carver critics, on his stories rather than his poems.

Stull, William L., and Maureen P. Carroll, eds., *Remembering Ray: A Composite Biography of Raymond Carver*, Capra, 1993.

This volume collects useful comments and anecdotes about Carver by friends, editors, and readers.

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□, "On Bobber and Other Poems," in *Call If You Need Me: The Uncollected Fiction and Other Prose*, Vintage Books, 2001.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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:

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