The Conquerors Study Guide

The Conquerors by Phyllis McGinley

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Phyllis McGinley's poem "The Conquerors," which was published in her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Times Three* in 1960, deals with a topic that she did not often write about. Known in her time as a suburban housewife poet and a writer of light verse, McGinley most often wrote about domestic topics, things that happened in the home, in the suburbs, things that happened, as she was to say, outside her window. The topic of "The Conquerors," however, influenced by the destruction caused by World War II, is the weapons that are employed in fighting and killing and massive and epic battles or wars.

McGinley, in the book *The Writer Observed,* describes the difference between her so-called light verse and the poems with more weighty material. In the book, she states that she has arrived at a distinction between the two: "the appeal of light verse is to the intellect and the appeal of serious verse is to the emotions." And so it is with this poem, "The Conquerors," that McGinley appeals more to the intellect than to the emotions when she asks readers to look at the absurdity of war. The main thrust of the poem is even more specific: she asks that Americans in particular, with their pride soaring over the creation of their newest weapon of destruction—the atom bomb—look within themselves to re-examine their conscience. In an attempt to bring the American consciousness out of its misguided use of scientific discovery and to inspire Americans to regain a sense of morality with regard to human life, she mocks those who might boast of killing masses of people with one small bomb. Her poem reminds Americans, or anyone who reads it, that there is nothing to be proud of in any kind of war. She does this in a deceivingly light tone, however, almost to the point of making her readers laugh. But this does not diminish the message. It is just McGinley's way of delivering it.

Author Biography

Phyllis McGinley was a poet who, no matter what subject matter she focused on, would seldom, if ever, hear her poetry referred to as anything other than light verse. Born on March 21, 1905, in Ontario, Oregon, and writing her first poem at the age of six and then deciding to be a poet in college after winning several writing competitions, McGinley would spend most of her professional writing career fending off criticism that tended to diminish her image of a suburban housewife poet—an image that was meant to dismiss any depth in her writing.

The fact that McGinley at first enjoyed writing poetry that focused on somewhat lightweight subjects, such as the latest fads, popular news personalities, and trivial day-to-day facets of urban living, and then collecting these poems in her first book, *On the Contrary,* gave credence to her critics' rather dismissive evaluation of her creative work. Added to this is the fact that McGinley admits that she was persuaded to continue along these lines when the *New Yorker* offered her more money if she would forget more serious topics in order to write lighter verse. McGinley is quoted in a *Newsweek* article in 1960 as having said, "Women will usually write what people want them to."

Despite the tone of her critics, McGinley's poetry won her the 1960 Nobel Prize for poetry. The book that won her the prize was *Times Three,* in which her poem "The Conquerors" is the first poem in the collection. Ironically, McGinley would eventually wear her title of Housewife Poet proudly and go on to publish a collection of essays in Sixpence in *Her Shoe,* which praised domesticity. McGinley was encouraged by her publisher to write these essays as a kind of rebuttal to writers such as Betty Friedan, who had published her book, *The Feminine Mystique,* which warned women in the 1960s that they would never find fulfillment as housewives. Sales of McGinley's book slowly climbed to the bestsellers list and then stayed there for more than twenty-six weeks.

Besides writing poetry, McGinley taught school, wrote ad copy for an advertising firm, and was the editor of poetry at *Town and Country* magazine. She also wrote books for children, a play titled *Small Wonder,* and the narration for the film *The Emperor's Nightingale.* In a *Time* magazine article titled "The Telltale Hearth," McGinley has this to say to her critics who try to undermine her poetry: "At a time when poetry has become the property of the universities and not the common people, I have a vast number of people who have become my readers. I have kept the door open." To this she adds, "If people can't understand it why write it?" In a 1954 article in the *Saturday Review,* she summed up her writing as follows: "What I have been consciously trying to do recently . . . is to narrow the gulf between 'light' and 'serious' verse. One other thing: I always try to share with my readers the immediacy of my own delight or despair of the world as I see it through my window."

McGinley was married at age thirty-one to Bill (also referred to as Charles) Hayden, an executive at the Bell Telephone Company. She was a stayat- home mother of two girls, Julie and Patsy. She died in New York City on February 22, 1978.

Poem Text

It seems vainglorious and proud
Of Atom-man to boast aloud
His prowess homicidal
When one remembers how for years,
With their rude stones and humble spears,
Our sires, at wiping out their peers,
Were almost never idle.
Despite his under-fissioned art
The Hittite made a splendid start
Toward smiting lesser nations;
While Tamerlane, it's widely known,
Without a bomb to call his own
Destroyed whole populations.
Nor did the ancient Persian need
Uranium to kill his Mede,
The Viking earl, his foeman.
The Greeks got excellent results
With swords and engined catapults.
A chariot served the Roman.
Mere cannon garnered quite a yield
On Waterloo's tempestuous field.
At Hastings and at Flodden
Stout countrymen, with just a bow
And arrow, laid their thousands low.
And Gettysburg was sodden.
Though doubtless now our shrewd machines
Can blow the world to smithereens
More tidily and so on,
Let's give our ancestors their due.
Their ways were coarse, their weapons few.
But ah! how wondrously they slew
With what they had to go on.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-7

In the first line, McGinley uses the word *vainglorious,* which means conceited or to believe that one is self-important. Her use of this word sets the tone of the entire poem, as she mocks any American who might have been feeling high and mighty with regard to the U.S. victory in World War II. It is easy to infer from the first three lines of this poem that McGinley intends to knock down a few pegs anyone who might feel proud about killing fellow human beings.

By the fourth line, the reader not only can infer what McGinley's intentions are but can deduce the manner in which she will reveal her intentions—tongue-in-cheek irony. To do this, she reaches back into history and brings forward to the reader the humble beginnings of war by mentioning the rudimentary weapons of cave men. In this way, she immediately dismisses the "prowess homicidal" of modern science, stating that killing was just as effective in ancient times when people used "rude stones and humble spears." In other words, killing is killing. When someone is dead, what does it matter how they were killed? From the very beginning of the poem, McGinley questions how Americans came up with the idea that they had something to be proud of in using modern technology to kill thousands of people.

Then as a final remark, McGinley adds that although America might boast that masses of people were killed by just one atomic bomb, our ancestors could also boast that they killed, in relative numbers, just as high a percentage of their population, even if it meant that to do this, they "were almost never idle."

Lines 8-13

In the next stanza, McGinley makes it a point to put a face on the ancient people, especially the warmongers among them. In this way, she adds personality and history to an abstract idea. By delving into these historic details, she can further assault the American false pride in its role as mass murderer and conqueror. The two names that McGinley mentions are the Hittites, an aggressive ancient group of people, and Tamerlane, a ruthless conqueror.

During the second millennium B.C., the Hittites were a group of people who, at various times, ruled parts of Syria, the city of Babylon, and central and eastern Anatolia (the peninsula that modern-day Turkey occupies today). As their kingdom advanced, the Hittites displaced the former occupants by initiating brutal wars. The hub of their kingdom was rich in iron deposits, which the Hittite people mined and used for weaponry. Their iron-working technology was a major resource in ushering in the Iron Age. In a confrontation over Syria, the Hittites and the Egyptians were responsible for what has been deemed one of the greatest battles of the ancient world.

Tamerlane, also known as Timur the Lame, was a conqueror in the fourteenth century, who is remembered for his barbarity. He conquered people and land that stretched from India and Russia to the Mediterranean Sea. For thirty years, he led his band of men and was considered the last of the mighty conquerors of Central Asia. His ruthless killing gave rise to many stories of his bloody quests. He cultivated the military arts initiated by the infamous Genghis Khan. The only weapons that were available to him were arrows and spears, but this did not deter him. He was able to cut down unarmed peasants quite easily. His surprise attacks were notorious. McGinley does not go into all these details, however, because she is a writer of light verse. This means that her way of attacking, her weapon, is not as sharp as a spear. Her weapon is rather blunt, but it nonetheless hits its mark.

Lines 14-19

From the above stanza, McGinley moves into a broader description of history. She mentions the Medes, a group of people who lived in the vicinity of Iran, northern Assyria, and Armenia. The Medes first established an empire in that area; then, in 550 B.C., the Persians conquered the Medes. Although she does not mention it, the Medes were later conquered by the Greeks, the Romans, and so many other different people that they eventually completely lost their distinctive culture. McGinley's reference to uranium is, of course, a repeated reference to the fact that the Medes were conquered without the assistance of atomic weaponry. She also mentions the Vikings, but only in passing.

She continues, bringing up the Greeks who fought with "swords and engined catapults." Well, the swords speak for themselves. They were a minor improvement over spears and bows and arrows, but it wasn't until the "engined catapult" came onto the scene that battle weaponry took on a greatly increased capacity for power. The word *catapult* comes from the Greek and means "to pierce the shield." With the mechanized catapult, the first having been built around the middle of the third century B.C., a large stone or javelin could be hurled anywhere from four hundred to eight hundred yards. Not only did this add power to the weaponry, it also allowed the two warring parties to fight at a distance from one another. This was a precursor of the atom bomb, which could be dropped from an airplane at a distance of thousands of feet. One result of this invention was that the aggressor could kill his so-called enemy without ever humanizing his target. With McGinley's mention of the catapult, readers gain the sense that she is giving them a progressive report of the development of weaponry, which they can also foresee will end with the Americans and their bomb.

With the invention of the chariot, which McGinley mentions in line 19, the Romans added speed to their war tactics. With a horse pulling a two-wheeled version of the chariot, warfare was once again revolutionized. The armies that employed them found they had greatly extended their range with the unprecedented mobility that the chariots provided. Conquerors therefore could push their troops further, expand their territories, and, of course, kill more people. First McGinley mentions the improvement in weaponry; then she insinuates the progression of power and control over other people.

Lines 20-25

In this stanza, McGinley once again opens up to a broader scope. She now mentions only the names of great historic battles. She begins with Waterloo, Napoleon's final defeat, which ended twenty-three years of war between France and the rest of Europe; then she continues to the Battle of Hastings, which occurred in 1066 and was the cause of the defeat of Harold II of England and established the Norman rule there. She also refers to the battle of Flodden (1513), a war that decided English victory over Scotland. And with the battle of Gettysburg (1863), McGinley ends her inventory of wars but not before she describes this American conflict with the word *sodden,* by which, it must be assumed, she means to convey an image of the field being soaked, not so much from rain as from blood. The battle of Gettysburg caused some of the Civil War's greatest losses—more than forty thousand men died during this battle. It is also interesting to note that, at the close of her progression of battles, McGinley ends on American soil, taking the reader back to the place where the poem started.

Line 26-32

In the last stanza, McGinley most actively displays her mockery of war as well as her mockery of the pride of the "Atom-man" in her first stanza. To mock American pride in their development of the atomic bomb, she praises the ancestors for figuring out how to kill so many people with such primitive tools of war.

Her use of the word "machines" is fascinating, though. Since she began the poem referring to bombs, one would think that she would end with that term, but a bomb isn't really a machine. Did she use the word "machines" to find a match for "smithereens"? Or is she referring to the airplanes that were used to drop the bombs? Her choice of the phrase "more tidily" in line 28 seems to imply the airplanes. What is tidy about war and killing? The tidiness must be referring to the distance from which the airplane drops the bomb, how it allows those who drop it to get "tidily" out of its way without feeling any physical effect. She could also be referring to the fact that this distance allows a tidier psychological or emotional effect. Though the bomb causes destruction that affects thousands of people in its immediate area, which is a great expanse in itself, and though it can also cause damage to unborn generations as the radiation embeds itself into the land, the water, and the human cells, those people who drop the bomb never see the results of the destruction they have caused. From the distance that they drop it, it is even hard to imagine the destruction, unless they take the time to return to the scene, but that would probably not occur until several years later. They might see photographs. They might even visit some of the victims. But they will never see the blood. They will never hear the cries. And, therefore, they may never acknowledge their part in the destruction.

Themes

Technology and Progress

Themes Technology and Progress Throughout the lines of this poem, McGinley weaves a historic perspective to show the progress of technology in war weaponry. She does this, always in a tongue-in-cheek manner, to point out that there have been, over the millennia, a progression that has gone awry. She does this in two different ways. First, she demonstrates that although there has been progress in the development of more intricate, more specialized, and more complex weaponry, it always ends up that the weapons do the same thing, kill. They don't necessarily kill better, because how does one do that? Then she subtly asks if the progress is in the numbers. But then, so what if the numbers have increased. What does that mean? And is that to be considered progress?

Second, the underlying message in the poem is whether this progress is a misuse of knowledge or maybe the even greater question, Is it really progress at all? Is there something inherent in mankind that makes people need to conquer another group of people? Does invention have to focus on weaponry? Would mankind have progressed further or faster if people had not used the knowledge of metal refining to make weapons? What if atomic energy had had a focus devoid of its destructive power? Would mankind know things today that may have been lost because of the distractive nature of aggression (or so-called defense) pulling some of the greatest inventive minds into a military way of thinking rather than working on solving other, peaceful problems?

Strength and Weakness

Most apparent in this poem is the theme of conquest. Promoted throughout history (and biology, too) is the concept of the survival of the fittest. The strong shall prevail over the weak. The people with the most advanced weaponry will become the victors. Conquerors are hailed as great heroes. The vanquished are plundered to the point that they not only lose their material possessions, they lose their cultural identity. McGinley questions all these assumptions in her poem. By bringing into her poem the names of huge, ancient cultures that one by one conquered one another in their desire to control the world, to gain majesty, and to make a place for themselves in history, she makes the reader look down that road and question popular assumptions about war that might not be true. Such assumptions might include fighting for the sake of peacekeeping; fighting for the sake of democracy or some other philosophical ideal; fighting for some god, etc. In the process, she also makes Americans look at themselves in relation to historical figures. If the mass murderers of the past appear barbarous, what does that say about current world situations in which the United States claims victory with an atomic bomb? If Tamerlane was considered a brute with his spears and bows and arrows, what will historians think of the effects of radiation when used to conquer a nation?

Pride

McGinley begins her poem with the line: "It seems vainglorious and proud," emphasizing her contempt for those who would not only claim credit for murdering people but would garnish their acts with a sense of pride. The difference between aggression and defense is a fine line. It is a line that nations have dealt with all through history. When does the defense of a nation turn into an aggressive act? If an aggressor attacks, they who defend their families and loved ones deserve to be called heroes. They deserve to be proud of their courage. But war is not so cut and dry. Do conquerors know when to stop defending? They tend to become involved in retaliation, revenge, and then total obliteration. Greed and the thirst of power can also seep into the picture. Is this something to be proud of? McGinley asks.

Another aspect of McGinley's questions about pride might refer to the type of weaponry used in war, whether on the part of the aggressor or de- fender. Two people fighting face to face, hand to hand, in a struggle to defend what they believe is right, might be called courageous. But when a nation uses weapons of mass destruction, killing not only those who might be considered aggressors but also innocent children, mothers pregnant with the next generation, old people who have retired from the world, are these acts to be proud of?

As the number of deaths increase from cave man type hand-and-rock battles to modern techniques that are capable of wiping out whole cities in a matter of minutes, war moves into a realm of absurdity. Therefore "Atom-man" in this poem has no reason to "boast aloud" of his prowess of killing. So what if he can wipe out the world? What does that mean? Is that something to boast about or something to be ashamed of? McGinley mocks this pride by ending her poem with praise for primitive man whose "ways were coarse, their weapons few." She is, of course, not praising murder of any kind. Rather she is exposing all murder for what it is. Killing is killing. Nothing to ever be proud of.

Style

Meter

McGinley uses an iambic meter in her poem. Iambic meter is the most common metric measure in English poetry. It consists of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable. For example, in the first line of her poem, the pattern would be broken down like this: "It seems vain-glor-i-ous and proud" with the words *it* and *vain* unstressed; and the words *seems* and the syllable *glor-* stressed; the syllable *i-* (in the middle of the word glorious) is unstressed, while the last syllable in this word *-ous* is stressed; *and* ending with the word *and* being unstressed and the word *proud* being stressed. This produces a somewhat singsong effect, almost like a child's nursery rhyme, but it also makes the poem very easy to read. The meter is very similar to the natural meter of conversational speech.

The poem is built on tetrameters and trimeters. This means that there are some lines that consist of four feet and some that have three feet. Feet, in poetic terms, contain two syllables each. McGinley's pattern for this poem is as follows: the first stanza is made up of two tetrameters lines, followed by one trimeter line, which in turn is followed by three tetrameter lines, followed by a final trimeter line. This pattern occurs in the first stanza and then again in the last stanza. The middle stanzas consistently follow another slightly different pattern: two tetrameter lines followed by one trimeter line, and then this is repeated. This pattern is so consistent that it draws the reader's attention to the first and last stanzas, each having an extra line. She could have done this to draw attention to the words or images portrayed in the first and last stanzas, or she might have liked the form that gives a little more weight to the beginning, where she sets up the mood of the poem, and the end, where she throws her witty punch.

Rhyme

Rhyme McGinley is all about simplicity, with her rhyming scheme following suit. She uses a very regular and reliable rhyming pattern that creates a soothing rhythm. The pattern is: *aab cccb* for the first and last stanzas and aab ccb for all the stanzas in between. McGinley also makes a very strong point of using alternating masculine and feminine rhyming patterns. She claims, in her essay "The Light Side of the Moon," that she employs this technique because it is "a favorite device of mine to create music and avoid monotony."

A masculine rhyme occurs on the last syllable of a word. For example, the first two lines of the poem end with the words *proud* and *aloud*. The fourth, fifth, and sixth lines end with years, spears, and *peers*. These are all examples of masculine rhyme. However, in the same stanza, lines three and seven end in feminine rhyme with the words *homicidal* and *never idle*. A feminine rhyme occurs when the rhyme falls on a syllable that is followed by an unaccented syllable. By ending every third line (a pattern that is thrown a

little off kilter in the first and last stanza) with a feminine rhyme, McGinley not only creates a sense of music and avoids monotony, but she also creates a release, or pause, in the momentum of the poem. The line with the feminine rhyme, by definition, ends in an unstressed syllable, generating an excuse to stop and take a quick breath, much like the use of a comma in a sentence.

Style

McGinley states in a *Newsweek* article that she is "moving toward something a little different—poetry of wit, which is what the Cavalier poets used to write." This is a style that prevails in most of McGinley's works, with "The Conquerors" being no exception. The Cavalier poets were a group of English poets (Robert Herrick and Richard Lovelace were two of them) who wrote not only with wit but with simplicity. Their themes included topics such as love and loyalty, and they spoke with a very direct voice. Their poetry, like McGinley's, was considered elegant but light. "Light verse," McGinley explains, "demands brilliance of execution. The surface must be as glittering as the content; in some cases it *is* the content." In essence, what McGinley is saying is that her style is witty in the simplest and most comprehensive way that she can make it. The form of the poem is not only simple, it is also ingenious, as it adds to the poem almost as much as the content. McGinley does not believe in using an esoteric vocabulary. Her purpose is not to show off her education. The simple style that she employs reflects the way she looks at life—in a disciplined, well-planned out, witty but down-to-earth manner. Her poem "The Conquerors" is a prime example of that simplistic and Cavalier style. It is composed of simple words, rhymes, beats, and patterns. Although its topic is not simple, it is packaged in a very simple form. And it is because of its simple style that its message cannot help but reach its target. There are no complications to stop it.

Historical Context

War

McGinley alludes to no less than twelve wars in her poem. Although she mentions them almost lightly, she assumes that readers will inherently understand that she does not mean to take the topic of war in anything less than a serious tone. For she and the rest of the world, when this poem was written, were still feeling the aftershocks of one of the worst of all wars, World War II. On August 6 and 9, 1945, the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed by the first atomic bombs used in warfare, which led to the end of the war and established the United States as one of the most powerful nations in the modern world. One of the aftermaths of World War II was the Cold War, which was at its height when McGinley wrote her poem. The world's two strongest powers, the USSR and the United States, aimed military weaponry at one another, and peace in the world balanced precariously on the threats these two countries thrust at one another. Each country knew that if one discharged one bomb on the other, it could ultimately mean the end of the world. In other words, war weaponry had advanced to the point where it was capable of total annihilation of human life on this planet.

During this time of the Cold War, many people began building bomb shelters in an attempt to protect themselves from an atomic bomb blast. Some families dug huge holes in their backyards and reinforced them with concrete to make an underground shelter. Then they stocked the shelter with a year's worth of food, believing that they could hide in their shelter and ride out the radiation that would infiltrate every living thing on the surface of the earth if war ensued.

This was also a time of bomb raid practices. Sirens would wail, and citizens would run for the nearest bomb shelter that was marked with a black and yellow sign. School children would duck under their desks. It was a time of simple beliefs, but also it was a time of great fear. The depths and complexities of nuclear warfare were not fully understood. The effects of radiation were just beginning to be realized.

Feminism

McGinley was among a small group of women who were graduating from college in the thirties. In that sense, she was ahead of her times. But if she thought of herself as a feminist, it was a feminist with a very different definition of what women needed, what rights they should fight for. McGinley, although she held several different jobs, was a stay-at-home mom, and she not only enjoyed her domesticity, she thrived in it and glorified it in her poetry. When Betty Friedan published her book, *The Feminine Mystique,* stating that women needed to get out of the home, needed to be liberated from domesticity because they would never find fulfillment if they remained housewives, McGinley decided to fight back. She wrote a book, *Sixpence in Her Shoe,* in which she praised the housewife, stating, according to an article in a 1965 edition of *Time* that

"even today's educated woman can fit happily into the framework of the home." Women at that time were just on the cusp of renewed interest in women's rights. Friedan's book might have ignited a revolution, but nonetheless McGinley's book also became a bestseller.

Anti-Communism

Anti-Communism The 1950s, the decade in which this poem was written, was famous for its anti-communism sentiments in the United States. The Cold War, with the USSR representing the powerful communist nation, was at its height, giving America, representing the most powerful democracy, something to butt up against. And butt up against it, it did. Mc- Carthyism was prevalent in this decade. Mc- Carthyism is the practice of publicizing accusations of political disloyalty without sufficient evidence. It is named for Senator Joseph McCarthy, who was the leading voice in the televised hearings into alleged communist activity in the U.S. Army, the entertainment industry, and anywhere that rumors of potential allegiance to a communist philosophy might appear.

The 1950s is also the era that marked the establishment of the John Birch Society, a right-wing, anti-communist organization whose objectives were ridding the United States of all communists, repealing all social-security legislation and the graduated income tax, as well as impeaching certain government officials. Through the efforts of both Joseph McCarthy and the John Birch Society, many people lost their jobs, were persecuted as dissidents, or were made to feel paranoid about speaking against their government.

Television

Critical Overview

In 1954, Phyllis McGinley found an image of herself on the cover of the *Saturday Review.* In 1965, she found a picture of herself on the cover of *Time* magazine. This in itself demonstrates the significance and popularity of her poetry. In 1954, the *Saturday Review* praised her collection of poetry contained in her newest publication, at that time, *The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley.* The article inside this magazine begins with the phrase, "The news today is that Phyllis McGinley has done it again." The message in the article is that McGinley is a proliferate writer of light verse.

No matter how she is praised, or in which publication she is praised, McGinley's name is always associated with light verse. Some critics wonder why more light verse is not written. As Gerard Previn Meyer puts it in the *Saturday Review* article, "why is there not more light verse written today, verse that offers no bewildering (if sometimes fascinating) symbols dredged up from the unconscious, verse that, to the contrary, is the product of conscious art?" Not since the writing of Dorothy Parker, on the feminine side, and Ogden Nash, on the masculine, has there been a writer who is so at ease at creating light verse as McGinley is, say most of her critics.

In the article from Time magazine, McGinley is called "one of the most widely read and acclaimed poets in the U.S." This article praises McGinley not so much for the depth or art of her poetry but for her popular appeal. She is, according to this article, the "sturdiest exponent of the glory of housewifery, standing almost alone against a rising chorus of voices summoning women away from the hearth." In other words, in her day and time, McGinley's works were seen as the antithesis of the second wave of feminism that was just beginning to show signs of birth. This article concludes by generalizing all McGinley's poetry by stating that she has an "awesome capacity for self expression."

For criticism aimed at more specific works, there is an article in a 1960 issue of *Newsweek* that declares that because of McGinley's book, *Times Three,* in which her poem "The Conquerors" appears, her publisher must love her. But the article does not mention any specific qualities of the book, except for the fact that this book will probably make money because the Book-of-the-Month Club chose it as an alternative. W. H. Auden, however, digs deeper into the poems collected in McGinley's Pulitzer Prize-winning book. Auden compares her to Jane Austen, Colette, and Virginia Woolf, for her sensibility and imagination. He also states that her writing is very feminine, without being a "ferocious feminist." Auden then goes on to describe the dif- ference between feminine and masculine imaginations, declaring finally that when she is "confronted with things and people who do not please her, she does not, like many male satirists, lose her temper or even show shocked surprise; she merely observes what is the case with deadly accuracy." But Auden concedes that McGinley has her fair share of masculine imagination, too, as shown in her "dexterity in rhyming." Ignoring what might today be considered sexist definitions in Auden's praise of McGinley's writing, his sentiments ring true: overall he believes that her poetry is worth reading.

Bette Richart in a 1960 article published in *Commonweal* magazine says that "certainly it is true that she is, within her tradition, an important poet, and she writes as wisely and sadly of youth and old age as anyone since Cicero, perhaps." Richart then goes on to critique light verse in general, of which she admits McGinley is one of its high practitioners, "Amusing though it is, light verse is effectively didactic, and its lessons are tolerance, self-sacrifice, and joy" in the little things of life. But Richart also states that sometimes McGinley sounds too complacent. "To glorify the commonplace is one thing . . . but to glorify the merely common is another."

A 1960 issue of the *Saturday Review* begins with great praise for McGinley's Times Three. It will "give Miss McGinley's expanding public an orderly cut-back inspection of the three-stage rocket which has carried an explicit poet beyond the force-field of light verse and put her into orbit." This article was written after McGinley won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry as well as during the crest of excitement about the U.S. space program, obviously. The article continues by stating that even though McGinley wrote in a field occupied by the great poetic minds of Ogden Nash and Morris Bishop, "she had her own voice to express her gaiety and wit." In direct reference to "The Fifties" chapter of *Times Three,* David McCord, the author of this magazine article, describes McGinley's satire as sharp. McCord also applauds her for "her eloquent moments, her compassion, her intuition, her ability to pare the world's wormy apple with a razor blade."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Hart, a former college professor, is a freelance writer and copyeditor. In this essay, she examines possible reasons why McGinley's poetry is considered light verse even when the subject of her poetry is very serious, such as in the case of the poem "The Conquerors."

Although she may not have been either the first nor the last person to define her writing as light poetry, McGinley was, nonetheless, among those who agreed with this tag, although she did have some reservations. In her essay, "The Light Side of the Moon," she writes that "conscious techniques . . . are important to poetry and particularly vital to that narrow branch of the profession in which I specialize. I write what is called Light Verse (as opposed, perhaps, to Ponderous Verse)." McGinley is making three points with this statement. She is acknowledging that her poetry has been relegated by her critics to a somewhat offstage position in relation to the whole realm of poetics. Her poetry has and probably always will be referred to as "light." Next, she is making it known that even though her poetry is referred to in these terms, this does not mean that writing light verse is something that can be done without effort. In other words, poetry does not come forth from some magical place of pure inspiration, whether it is considered light verse or not. Writing poetry is deliberate work in all its forms. And finally, McGinley is saying, in her usual tongue-in-cheek manner, that even though her poetry might always be tagged with this "light" label, it does not mean that her poetry does not inspire thought.

So questions that these comments might summon up could be such as these: Why is McGinley's poetry considered light verse? Why is light verse generally considered to have little meaning? And when McGinley writes about topics as serious as war, death, and mass destruction, as in her poem "The Conquerors," how does she pull this off and still give the impression that her topic is not ponderous? How does she convey her meaning?

According to several definitions of light verse, McGinley's poem fits into the category very easily, at least in some aspects. First, her poem displays technical competence. "The Conquerors" is written in a very consciously laid out meter and includes a very carefully chosen rhyming pattern. The meter and rhyming scheme in this poem are so perfect, as a matter of fact, that they could almost be considered monotonous. The poem has a cadence that people could march to. War protesters could shout these lyrics as they paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House.

McGinley's choice of words in this poem demonstrates a technical grasp of vocabulary that is so competent that she can portray a powerful image in a very simple and straightforward manner. There is little if any need for most elementary school children to have to consult a dictionary to understand this poem. The historic allusions aside, the only words a fifth grade student might not know the meaning for are "vainglorious," "smiting," "garnered," and "smithereens." But these words may be somewhat unfamiliar, not because they belong to some esoteric vocabulary but because the words,

themselves, are dated. They just aren't used anymore on television or in the world of an eleven-year-old child. Not only are the words in this poem easy to understand, the images that are cast through these words are right out of the movies. Once the allusions to the battles are recognized, the epic battle scenes become very familiar. They've been recreated so many times that who among McGinley's readers, or for that matter among some fifth grade class, could say that they could not imagine them?

Wit is another element that is often mentioned in reference to light verse, and McGinley definitely demonstrates her wittiness in this poem. She does this in several ways. Her rhymes are witty, for one. For example, the way she rhymes "homicidal" with "never idle" is not only a clever use of words, but it also reinforces the satire of her poem by linking these two concepts together. Satire is another element of some light verse. It is a way of highlighting human shortcomings by ridiculing them; and by linking "homicidal" with "never idle," McGinley is pretending to praise the ancestors because they were both busy and competent in their killing of one another. By setting up this image, not only is she mocking the ancestors, but she is also mocking modern warmongers as well. How can you be so proud of your homicidal prowess, she asks the omnipotent Atom-man, when long ago, long before bombs and modern weaponry were produced, people killed one another with stones? How ridiculous to be proud of some creation that does no more than a stone did. Of course, behind these words, McGinley is criticizing anyone who is proud of killing, no matter what their reasons and no matter what their weapons.

But light verse is also defined as having a trivial or playful subject. Another attribute is that light poetry has as a motive to entertain or amuse. Another is that it often involves nonsensical terms or words. "The Conquerors" has none of these elements. And yet McGinley's poem does flirt with some of these issues. Because of the meter, or rather because of the readers' association of the meter to light verse, the voice skips along the words almost happily, almost as if the poem were a limerick. Another factor of association is that many children are raised on this singsong tone in nursery rhymes, so the pattern feels light.

Although the subject in "The Conquerors" is serious, the tone of the poem is light enough to trick the reader into thinking that the motive is to amuse. By writing, in line 9, that "The Hittite made a splendid start," McGinley's tone sounds playful. The phrase "splendid start" conjures up memories of Mary Poppins praising her wards for having cleaned up their room or taken their medicine. This could also apply to her phrase in line 17, "excellent results," as well as in line 20, "garnered quite a yield." That Mary Poppins kind of voice also appears in the last stanza, where McGinley writes, "Let's give our ancestors their due," and "But ah! how wondrously they slew." These two lines are peppy, as if a cheerleader were sending a loud message to people in the stands watching a football game.

Since, typically, light verse was written to amuse, it was assumed that there was very little meaning above and beyond the immediate. Light verse was like a comedy or a modern sitcom. It was meant to entertain. It was narrative, a short story. It was often sung. And its topics included love, food, and social custom. Lewis Carroll's "Hunting of

the Snark" and Alexander Pope's "Rape of the Lock" are often referred to as typical examples. Although this does not seem to fit McGinley's poem, there is one more aspect of light verse that does define "The Conquerors" perfectly. Light verse was often irreverent but moral, its use of irony made in an attempt to bring about social change.

Although McGinley's poem is about war and mass destruction, there is no reference or mention of blood. There is no reference to pain. There is only a hint of a reference to an individual. Most of her images are big, impersonal, and somewhat vague. They are so vague at times that readers almost forget that she is talking about death and torture, and yet, at the same time, she does deliver her message. How does she do this?

McGinley writes that "light verse aims at the intellect which it wishes to amuse and divert." And then she adds that "lightness, in the meaning of shedding light, may be an adequate apology for our profession." So McGinley has turned the definition, the tag that has followed all her poetry, into something that she can better deal with. If her verse is called light, then she will make her poetry like a beam of light, a beam of intelligence. But it will not be a beam that pierces; it will be one that deflects, casts shadows; it will be a playful light, even though the subject matter is deadly.

McGinley mentions no blood or pain because that is not the picture she wants to portray. Well, it is the picture she wants because she has alluded to it, but it is a picture that has been drawn in outline only. So she will use phrases like "wiping out their peers" in line 6, instead of saying they stabbed their peers in the heart and left them, bleeding, as vultures circled overhead. She writes that the Hittites in line 9 move "toward smiting lesser nations" rather than writing that they raped and pillaged villagers, murdered children, and tortured men. And then later she writes that Tamerlane "destroyed whole populations." This statement is read with about the same emotional impact of someone stepping on a mound of ants. The picture is so broad that it is too big to have feelings about.

So McGinley's meaning is definitely directed at the intellect. First, the poem will require the intellect to figure out what her historical allusions are. She trusts that anyone who is interested will look up all the gory details if that is what they want. She has made so many allusions to so many massive battles that if readers looked up only one and followed it to its conclusion, there would be enough blood and gore in it to turn anyone's stomach. She has merely pointed the way. But she doesn't stop there. It is not her intention merely to remind readers of past wars. No, she wants to do much more than that. She wants to bring about change. She wants to see improvement. And she points this out, in an ironic way, which is also typical of light verse.

Throughout the poem, McGinley mentions many improvements in weaponry. She begins with rocks and stones, progresses through spears and bow and arrow; she jumps to chariots and cannons and ends with the atomic bomb. Now if that isn't progress, what is? But what does she do with this progression? She turns it on its head. She begins her poem with the "Atom-man" and ends her poem with "our shrewd machines," referring back to the atom bomb, but she doesn't leave it there, instead, she ends her poem by praising, once again, the ancestors with their rocks and stones. We

have progressed so far, she is saying, that we have learned to split the atom. But what are we using this knowledge for? How are we improving civilization with this discovery? Just exactly what have we conquered? And, finally, she is asking, Have we really progressed at all, if all we have learned is to kill?

McGinley may be a comic at heart, but her poem has a message. She may deliver her message with a soft touch, but that does not mean that the sentiments behind her poem will not be felt. She is clever and has chosen the words of this poem very carefully. She is simple, but war is not. There have been many war protesters, many messages delivered to try to stop them. McGinley has just tried a different approach. By using a veil of nurseryrhyme meters and limerick-like rhymes, she tricks her readers into listening to a brutal message. Once again, like Mary Poppins, McGinley offers a little sugar along with her medicine.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "The Conquerors," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following review-interview, McGinley discusses her publishing success.

In her gracious living room in suburban Larchmont, N.Y., Phyllis McGinley, seated on a Louis XV sofa, a bowl of roses lighting up the coffee table in front of her, fingered a copy of her latest collection of verse, *Times Three.* "I think it's a lovely book," she said. "I mean the way it's designed. It looks very good. I just love my publisher."

Miss McGinley's publisher loves her, too: The collection before this one, *The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley,* has sold an astounding (for poetry) 40,000 copies since it first appeared six years ago, and *Times Three,* covering three decades, has just been chosen as an alternate by the Book-of-the- Month Club for November.

"I think it's a very hopeful thing," said Miss McGinley, "not for me but for all poets. At least the public is being reminded what a stanza looks like on a page. And I've been building up," she said, "trying to get better. At first, back in the '30s, I was writing real light verse. I mean *really* light verse. That was when Dorothy Parker and Samuel Hoffenstein were in their heyday. But I've been moving toward something a little different —poetry of wit, which is what the Cavalier poets used to write. It wasn't until Wordsworth that there was this great dividing line between 'serious' poetry and 'light verse'."

A frequent and long-standing contributor to *The New Yorker,* she has also served on the advisory board of *The American Scholar,* and thus has a kind of official license to be considered a "serious" person. "I'm so sick of this 'Phyllis McGinley, suburban housewife and mother of two . . .'" she said. "That's all true, but it's accidental. I write about the village here, and the family, but that's only an eighth or a tenth of my work. The rest is different. There's a hell of a lot of straight social criticism."

Born 55 years ago in Oregon, raised in Colorado, and schooled in Utah, Miss McGinley came to New York and wrote "Swinburnian" poetry, then shifted into her lighter mood when a contract she made with *The New Yorker* provided for higher rates per line for lighter verse. ("Women will usually write what people want them to," she said. "Women are more amenable than men.") She is married to a New York Telephone Co. executive, Charles Hayden. Her time, most recently, has been devoted to her next book, in prose, *Saint-Watching,* and the reading of history.

Miss McGinley looked across the room at a rose-marble mantel that had been bought out of Mark Twain's house on West 10th Street in New York, and suddenly spoke of her love for her art: "I've always read poetry. I read it for enjoyment, for delight, pleasure, passion, to get drunk on . . . People have been reading and enjoying poetry for thousands of years, and I just don't believe that in the past 30 or 40 years anything has changed. I don't see how it could."

Source: Newsweek, "The Lady in Larchmont," in *Newsweek,* Vol. 56, No. 13, September 26, 1960, pp. 120-21.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Doyle surveys McGinley's poetry, asserting "she is abidingly aware of the divine in people and things."

In the house of poetry there are many mansions, most of them now vacant and dark, abandoned to the spider and the bat. The traveler passing that way shouts "Is there anybody there?" but there is no answer from the illustrious ghosts of Homer and Sophocles, Dante and Virgil, Shakespeare and Dryden and Pope, who had so many luminous things to say about the universe and man and so little to say about themselves. Evidently they felt that in discussing man they had revealed everything worth revealing about themselves. They had not heard about the Ego and the Id. Consequently, their remains are now revisited only by those literary paleontologists, candidates for higher degrees, who bring with them a whole set of new tools made available by Freud and Adler and Jung. Then there are "re-evaluations" that confirm Freud and Adler and Jung.

If one says "poetry" today without further specification, he will be understood as referring to the only still-functioning branch of poetry, the lyric. Lyric poetry, as a freshman might say, is when the writer talks about himself. It is the kind of poetry about which Aristotle had nothing to say in his unfinished *Poetics.* That omission has, however, not deterred the modern critic from applying the epic and dramatic criteria of Aristotle to lyric poetry and, when they do not fit, proving once more that the Master could be wrong.

Generally speaking, the new poetry has discarded the poetic tradition in so far as that is humanly possible. From the magic casements through which his great predecessors sought truth, the modern has turned to the wells of his own subconscious in the conviction that an inventory of its contents is of supreme interest to the waiting world. In only one green plot is traditional verse still cultivated by such practitioners as Ogden Nash, Margaret Fishback, Ethel Jacobson and others. It is the field variously known as "society verse" or "smart verse" or "light verse."

The latest comer to this field is Phyllis McGinley, and it begins to look as if, Scripture-wise, the last shall be first. For it is no derogation from the brilliant talents of her competitors to say that there is a high distinction in her work that places it in a special category. Light verse is delicate and deceptive art, of course. It looks so easy at a first encounter, as if tossed off in a fine careless rapture and never touched again. All inspiration, no perspiration. The usual ingredients are wit, humor, point, poise, malice, surprise, the exquisitely exact word and, if the writer has it, wisdom. Perhaps the last is the special McGinley gift. She is abidingly aware of the divine in people and things. At least half of all true wisdom is charity, and light verse writers, as a class, are not overly stocked with charity. A wise thing said lightly wakes few echoes, whereas the banal and the obvious spoken ponder-ously may go booming down the corridors of time to achieve immortality.

It is not that Miss McGinley is without likes and dislikes, loves and hates, but she writes like one who has mastered both. The fool, the bore and the charlatan get short shrift at her hands, but the punishment meted out to them is somewhat like the cuffs of a mother bear, at least half love. She suffers the fool, if not gladly, at least in the spirit of a common humanity: Christ died for all. "The Old Reformer" reads

Few friends he had that pleased his mind.
His marriage failed when it began,
Who worked unceasing for mankind
But loathed his fellow man.

Who has not known the lofty soul who would die for Man but wanted nothing to do with his next door neighbor? Who could not name a half dozen specimens of "The Old Politician" who clings to the stage too long and "becomes a Public Monument through sheer longevity"? Or of "The Old Philanthropist" who gives away millions but starves his typist? There is hardly one of these fourline portraits that does not call up some present prominent public figure, all of whom shall be nameless here, needless to say.

Her gift for humanizing holy persons without flippancy or irreverence is without equal, so far as I know. Saints in the flesh can be such problems and trials to those about them that it would be hard to say which is the saintlier. St. Bridget, who conducted the first "giveaway" bankrupted her family, then borrowed from her relatives to set up a sort of onewoman Marshall plan. Miss McGinley is puzzled as to just why Simeon Stylites remained on that pillar of his—"and so was the good Lord, rather." If Simeon was seeking publicity, he got it. "The Thunderer," St. Jerome, "God's angry man . . . The great name-caller, Who cared not a dime For the laws of libel And in his spare time Translated the Bible" leaves the saint's halo at a rakish angle, but he is every inch a saint. Six of these poems on the saints first appeared in the July 10 issue of *America.*

The natural enemies of the poets of clarity are, of course, the poets of obscurity—or, should I say, the poets of the indirect approach? T. S. Eliot will live long before he is more expertly dissected than he is in "Mrs. Sweeney among the Allegories." This burlesque is replete with the quiet desperation of a sorely tried soul who waits all evening for a glimmer of sense in "The Confidential Clerk" and goes away empty. The hungry sheep looks up and is not fed, but the hungry sheep has his revenge.

"The Jaundiced Viewer" poems will not endear Miss McGinley to the purveyors of television fare but they may afford a vicarious relief to some of the inarticulate watchers of the youngest of the arts. The current avalanche of family reminiscences was, I believe, precipitated when Clarence Day wrote *Life with Father.* Since that fatal hour, we have been besieged with "I remember" books that record the most incredible collection of charming, eccentric, crotchety and dispensable characters that ever converged in one spot in literature outside of Dickens. It is Oh to be an orphan! Miss McGinley's reaction to one of these is

The humor of family sagas is far from Shavian—
Including the Scandinavian.

However, she disdains to advert to the familiar saga of the Idiot Husband, the Precocious Child and the Knowing Wife, which is, as all Europeans know, the authentic American family and the firm base of our national greatness. Perhaps it would have been too much like shooting a sitting duck. But her roving eye sought and found the indubitably central symbol of all small-screen art in America's most prideful product, Teeth! In "Reflections Dental"

How pure, how beautiful, how fine
Do teeth on television shine!
No flutist flutes, no dancer twirls,
But comes equipped with matching pearls.
Gleeful announcers all are born
With sets like rows of hybrid corn.
Clowns, critics, clergy, commentators,
Ventriloquists and roller skaters,
M. C.'s who beat their palms together,
The girl who diagrams the weather,
The crooner crooning for his supper—
All flash white treasures, lower and upper,
With miles of smiles the airways teem,
And each an orthodontist's dream.

How beautiful are our teeth upon the mountain—of luscious, denatured food!

The service the light verse writer renders in a democracy—and he cannot function elsewhere—is unique and indispensable. There are abuses and excesses that are not amenable to law and unregardful of good taste, good manners or reason so long as fame and money are in prospect. Time enough for good taste and good manners when the barbarian is firmly established, respectable enough to afford those luxuries. It is here that the well-aimed shaft of barbed laughter can sometimes penetrate the hide of the pachyderm on the make and give him pause for a moment. The silvery laughter of the Comic Muse is not always drowned out by the din and uproar of the supercolossal pitchmen.

The peculiar debt that Anglo-American civilization owes to the Celt is the corrective that the latter has administered to the absurdities of that civilization. Call the roll of them: Swift, Steele, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde, Shaw. Swift, lethal as a black widow spider, probably roused more wrath than laughter. But the rest were more kindly and urbane. When Tony Lumpkin says, "I 'ates anything *low*," he speaks for a whole world of men who had looked into the glass and then gone away and forgotten what manner of men they were. The Tonies are likely to judge of a man's gentility by which finger, the forefinger or the little finger, he elevates when quaffing his liquor. If he elevates neither, he is plainly a peasant. When Wilde described a foxhunt as "the unspeakable in hot pursuit of the uneatable," he pinpointed the dead center of a whole culture. When Sheridan, looking about him on English society, selected the characters he was to M. C. in *The Rivals and The School for Scandal,* he was quite Celtic in his selections. And the

first sound sense ever written about the true difference between the Irishman and the Englishman is Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*.

Contrary to the popular notion, it is the unhappy Celt who is the realist and the bumbling Englishman who is content within the cocoon of his ideals and illusions. The Celt reverences God, but he is apt to play hob with household gods, popular fetishes and Pollyanna cant. When it rains in his world, it is not raining violets. That is why non-Celts are likely to find him insufferable and invite him out for a nice drink of hemlock. Incidentally, it was Peter Finley Dunne's "Mr. Dooley" who first perceived and highlighted the comic-opera aspects of the Spanish- American War when the rest of our journalists were still chanting a tribal epic about our purity of motive and prowess in war. He was also the first to turn a satirical eye on the role of the Supreme Court in politics. Those were the easy-going days before incense and anger filled the land.

Miss McGinley is in the Celtic tradition, whatever her lineage may be. The things of God she handles reverently, but the things that are Caesar's do not overly impress her. Yet there is a certain ruefulness in her humor that is reminiscent, somehow, of the old story of the two Irish farmers who waited, armed with shotguns, beside the path down which their landlord was accustomed to take his evening stroll. When midnight came and he did not, one asked the other: "What do ye make of it?" The other replied: "Well, I dinnaw. But I hope nawthin' serious has happened to the poor man." Unlike Dorothy Parker, Miss McGinley is not a killer. Mercy seasons her justice.

She can be quite serious on occasion in the workaday sense of that word, as in "Sunday Psalm." Once in an age there does come a flawless day, when all creation is as and where it should be, baptismal, pentecostal, a blessed pause in the onrush of time reminiscent of Eden, and sometimes the perfect day is, appropriately, a Sunday.

This is the day which the Lord hath made,
Shining like Eden absolved of sin,
Three parts glitter to one part shade:
Let us be glad and rejoice therein.
Tonight—tomorrow—the leaf will fade,
The waters tarnish, the dark begin.
But *this is the day the Lord hath made:*
Let us be glad and rejoice therein.

Sharply contrasted with "Sunday Psalm" is "The Day after Sunday."

Always on Monday, God's in the morning papers,
His Name is a headline, His works are
rumored abroad.
Having been praised by men who are movers and shapers.
From prominent Sunday pulpits, Newsworthy is God.

An unkind cut but not wholly uncalled for. During the war, when the fate of the world hung in the jittery balance, we were edified from time to time by the report that some top

statesman had accorded an honorable mention to God. It was a pleasant shock. But for the most part, the place assigned to God in our press is Monday's religious page. There is a place for everything and that is the place for Him, we have determined.

The blandest heresy that has come out of the war of the sects is that reverence for God consists, not in the proper and timely use of His Name, but in utter silence on the Subject in public life. On second thought, however, the silence is not quite utter: whenever some little man wants to emphasize and underline one of his weightier statements, he reaches out for the biggest word in his limited vocabulary, and, of course, it is always the Holy Name. It would almost seem that, banished by the Pharisees, He must still consort with publicans and sinners.

It is possible to quote rather freely from *The Love Songs of Phyllis McGinley* because the book's copyright notice contains no minatory clause about "no part of this book may be used" and so on. Apparently, Miss McGinley does not consider her pearls of such great price as all that.

Source: Louis F. Doyle, "The Poems of Phyllis McGinley," in *America,* Vol. 92, No. 12, December 18, 1954, pp. 320-22.

Topics for Further Study

Compare and contrast Tamerlane, the Mongol conqueror mentioned in McGinley's poem, to Hitler. Map out the areas of their conquests. Describe their tactics and their goals. What were the long-lasting effects of their assaults on other nations?

Collect war photographs from WWII and Vietnam and give a talk on the human factors behind the military actions. Focus on the atrocities of war on one side and the benefits, if any, on the other.

Write a rap poem (song) in the same meter and rhyming pattern as "The Conquerors." As your focus, use either the U.S. war on drugs or the war on poverty.

Look at the economic factors behind WWII. Explain why and how WWII helped the United States out of the Great Depression. Write a history of the bomb from its first use to modern developments of missiles and nuclear bombs.

Write a history of the bomb from its first use to modern developments of missiles and nuclear bombs.

Compare and Contrast

1940s: War production during World War II brings women out of the home and into the factories. War production also brings the U.S. economy out of the Great Depression.

1960s: The Vietnam War brings students out of the classroom to protest the draft, the war, and the deaths of thousands of their peers.

1990s: The Gulf War causes very little reaction in the United States.

1940s: The great weapon of mass destruction during World War II is the atomic bomb. Thousands of people are killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and even more suffer from the effects of radiation.

1960s: Agent Orange is used in Vietnam to defoliate the tropical jungles. Soldiers who are inadvertently sprayed with Agent Orange suffer from many physical ailments including sterility and possibly cancer.

1990s: Biological warfare is feared during the Gulf War, and so the U.S. troops are inoculated with anthrax vaccines, which may have, ironically, contributed to what is referred to as the Gulf War Syndrome.

1940s: Hitler is the main figure of World War II, the man the Allies come together to conquer.

1960s: Ho Chi Minh is the ruler of North Vietnam, the ruler the U.S. troops attempt to defeat.

1990s: Saddam Hussein is the aggressor in the Gulf War when he tries to take over the country of Kuwait. U.S. troops eventually defeat Hussein's armies.

1940s: Literature that defines this decade includes Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead,* William Saroyan's *The Human Comedy,* and Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery."

1960s: Some of the most popular literature includes Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird,* the poetry of Maya Angelou and Sylvia Plath, and a children's book by Maurice Sendak called *Where the Wild Things Are.*

1990s: Popular fiction includes many of Stephen King's books, several books by Danielle Steele and John Grisham, as well as Sex by Madonna, *Women Who Run with the Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, and *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* by John Gray.

1940s: American women are encouraged to leave the kitchen to fill factory positions that are vacated by men joining the armed forces. 1960s: American women are

encouraged to leave their homes, march in the streets in support of feminism, and otherwise reject the maledominated rules of the society in which they live.

1990s: More and more young women enter college and earn business masters degrees, then head for lucrative jobs in large corporations with realistic goals of one day becoming CEOs.

What Do I Read Next?

Portable Dorothy Parker, edited by Brendan Gill and published in 1991, is an extensive collection of Parker's poetry. Parker, like McGinley, was a popular writer, known for her light verse. McGinley is often compared to Parker.

Ogden Nash is also often compared to McGinley. His *Selected Poetry of Ogden Nash: 650 Rhymes, Verses, Lyrics and Poems* (1995) is a wide collection of his works, which are generally very humorous, a little lighter than McGinley's verses.

In the vein of light verse, Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark,* which was originally published in 1876, is a classic. This nonsense poem, republished in a paperback edition in 1998, involves a long sea voyage in search of the undefined snark. Critics have claimed that it had political overtones, like much of Carroll's other writings.

McGinley wrote her book Sixpence *in Her Shoe* in 1964 after her editors suggested that she give another point of view of the modern woman in her time, contrasting her lifestyle to the budding feminist movement. The book is divided into three sections and covers such topics as higher education for women, children's literature, and keeping up with the Joneses. Although the writing might be a little outdated, her strong feelings about the joys of housewifery make for interesting reading even for modern women.

The book that spurred the new wave of feminism, as well as McGinley's writing of her book *Sixpence in Her Shoe, was Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan's well-researched book brought to the forefront some of the underlying elements that were making some women in the 1960s restless. Having been told for years that the woman's place was in the home, Friedan challenged this assumption, and a revolution in women's thinking began.

Not for the faint-of-heart, Masuji Ibuse's historical novel *Black Rain* tells the horrific story of people who suffered through the atomic blast of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Ibuse is a powerful writer who follows the development and hardships of one Japanese family in a heartwrenching telling of what it was like to witness the shock waves, blasts, and radiation of the bomb. This book puts readers into the middle of the destruction so that they can witness for themselves the horrific power of this historic event.

Further Study

Doyle, Louis F., "The Poems of Phyllis McGinley," in *America,* December 18, 1954, pp. 320-22.

Doyle discusses some of McGinley's poetry in terms of poetic tradition, light verse, and McGinley's gift of "humanizing holy persons," as well as her ability to present everyday things without glorifying them.

Gibson, Walker, "Gardens, Bees, A & P's," in New York *Times Book Review,* October 2, 1960.

One of McGinley's poems is cited in this article, as well as a discussion of some of her other poems, including McGinley's Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Times Three.*

Grunwald, Beverly, "But Housework Can Be Fun," in *New York Times Book Review,* Vol. LXIX, No. 39, September 27, 1964.

Grunwald refers to McGinley's book *Sixpence in Her Shoe* that she wrote somewhat in answer to the feminist movement, but this article focuses primarily on McGinley herself, her decision to be a stay-at-home mom, and what that means to her.

Hersey, John, *Hiroshima,* Vintage, 1989.

Hersey recorded stories of victims of the atomic bomb not long after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, in 1945. Later, he collected these stories and published them in this book. The stories tell about the physical, psychological, and material destruction of the Japanese people.

Roleff, Tamara L., ed., *The Atom Bomb,* Turning Points in World History, Greenhaven Press, 2000.

This book provides a comprehensive history of the development of the atomic bomb, as well as a series of arguments for and against the dropping of the bomb on Japan.

Wagner, Linda Welshimer, *Phyllis McGinley,* Twayne, 1971.

A detailed account of McGinley's writings, this is the only book that is completely devoted to McGinley. Wagner has written a series of books on writers, McGinley being one of her lesser known subjects.

Bibliography

Auden, W. H., "Foreword," in *Times Three,* Viking Press, 1960, pp. ix-xv.

Breit, Harvey, "Phyllis McGinley," in *The Writer Observed,* The World Publishing Company, 1956, pp. 211-13.

Kalb, Bernard, "The Author," in *Saturday Review,* September 18, 1954, p. 11.

"Life with a Poet: The Lady in Larchmont," in *Newsweek,* September 26, 1960, pp. 120-21.

McCord, David, "She Speaks a Language of Delight," in *Saturday Review,* December 10, 1960, p. 32.

McGinley, Phyllis, "The Light Side of the Moon," in *American Scholar,* Vol. 43, Autumn 1965, pp. 555-68.

----, *Times Three,* Viking, 1960.

Meyer, Gerard Previn, "Urbane Suburbanite," in *Saturday Review,* September 18, 1954, pp. 11-2.

Richart, Bette, "The Light Touch," in *Commonweal,* December 9, 1960, pp. 277-79.

"The Telltale Hearth," in Time, June 18, 1965, pp. 74-8.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Poetry for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

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

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

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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

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

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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