The Cossacks Study Guide

The Cossacks by Linda Pastan

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Linda Pastan's poem □The Cossacks□ appears in her 2002 collection titled *The Last Uncle*. Although Pastan is generally associated with poetry related to domesticity and personal experience, her later poetry often considers themes of aging, mortality, and the reality of death. □The Cossacks□ contains these themes, but the poem is somewhat unusual in her canon of work because it is presented as a poem about her Jewish heritage. In the poem, she gives voice to what she describes as an aspect of Jewish thinking. She describes the tendency to focus on the negative or to assume that the worst is ahead, admitting a fear and deep pessimism in her own thinking. In contrast, her mother and F. (to whom the poem is dedicated) handle crises with serenity. Pastan touches on the theme of social masks to explain the difference between the two figures facing their own mortality; her mother pretended to be calm, but F. was genuinely calm. Ultimately, the speaker longs for the latter, but her own nature resists it.

Historically, the Cossacks to whom Pastan refers were groups of mercenaries who lived along the Russian border. Cossacks first appeared as a people in the fifteenth century, in the form of loosely organized, but related communities. By the sixteenth century, these groups had coalesced into two major groupings, one in the Ukraine and the other on the river Don bordering the Grand Duchy of Moscow. In the late nineteenth century, the Cossack men who served the czar had become active in suppressing rebellion and massacring Jews. Because of their violence and aggression toward Jews, Pastan uses them as figures of hostility and danger in □The Cossacks.□ The poem opens with the statement that they are always coming, and it ends with the sound of horses approaching, which the reader can imagine are those of the Cossacks. It is an effective image that infuses the poem with a sense of impending danger. Pastan is known for her affinity for metaphor and imagery, and both of those devices are in full force in this poem. The danger associated with the Cossacks is brought to life with imagery, but the Cossacks are actually a metaphor for death.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1932

Linda Olenik Pastan was born on May 27, 1932, in New York City. Her interest in writing poetry emerged when she was only ten or eleven years old, but she did not anticipate pursuing a career as a writer. In 1953, she married Ira Pastan, a molecular biologist, and the couple had two sons and a daughter. Pastan graduated in 1954 with a bachelor of arts from Radcliffe College. In 1955, she earned a master of library science from Simmons College, and in 1957 she received a master of arts from Brandeis University. Although she did not study writing formally, she continued to work at it and to seek improvement of her writing skills. She won the first of many poetry awards in 1958, when at age twenty-six she received the *Mademoiselle* Dylan Thomas Poetry Award. The noted American poet Sylvia Plath came in second. Among Pastan's other awards and honors are a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship (1972), a Bread Loaf Writers Conference fellowship (1974), the Poetry Society of America's De Castagnola Award (1978), the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize (2003), and a Pushcart Prize. She held the position of poet laureate of Maryland from 1991 to 1995. Her first book, *A Perfect Circle of Sun*, was published in 1971. From 1971 to 2005, she published fourteen more volumes. Two of her books, *PM/AM: New and Selected Poems* (1983) and *Carnival Evening: New and Selected Poems, 1968-1998* (1998), were nominated for the National Book Award. Pastan's 2002 collection, *The Last Uncle*, contains the poem □The Cossacks.□

Despite her interest in and talent for writing poetry and the early recognition of her work, Pastan set aside any career ambitions to fulfill her roles as a wife and mother, accepting the traditional duties of housekeeper consistent with the expectations of women in the 1950s. Still, her poetic voice remained active, and Pastan wrote poetry about domesticity, motherhood, children, seasons, and marital struggle. She is known for her spare and accessible style, and she often introduces metaphors and imagery that add depth to her treatment of her subjects. Although Pastan's themes generally center on domestic life and on her personal experiences, her poetry explores family relationships, maternal musings, and domestic frustration without becoming overly emotional or sentimental. While Pastan writes about the balance of power and dependence in marriage, she does so without a feminist agenda. In her early poetry, she presents an honest portrayal of her domestic life, defending it as difficult and challenging. In her later poetry, Pastan focuses on the themes of aging and mortality. Her poetry has been compared to that of Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, and Walt Whitman. Such comparisons point to her strong poetic voice, her consistent vision, and her distinctly American point of view.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-5

□The Cossacks□ is composed of five five-line stanzas (cinquains) written in free verse, or verse without a set rhyme pattern or meter. The first stanza opens with the statement that to Jews, hostility and danger are always around the corner. The speaker asserts that □the Cossacks are always coming,□ referring to the mercenary group that massacred Russian Jews in the nineteenth century. She generalizes her own fear and pessimism by claiming that her mind-set is common among Jews. Because of that tendency to assume the worst, she assumes that a spot on her arm is cancer. Also because of that tendency, she spends the last evening before the new year listing everyone who has died in that year, rather than reflecting on the promise and excitement of what is ahead of her. This first stanza introduces the themes of pessimism and death. The speaker's backward thinking is evident in Pastan's use of oxymoron when she writes that she □celebrate[s]□ by □counting / my annual dead.□

Lines 6-10

In the second stanza, the speaker recalls her mother's final days. Knowing that she was going to die, her mother entertained visitors with small talk. Pastan paints a picture of social awkwardness through the image of visitors coming to see a dying woman, perhaps to say their last good-byes and ask if they can do anything at all to give her peace and instead finding themselves engaged in talk about books and past travels. The speaker interprets her mother's behavior as showing □serenity□ and □manners.□ She suspects, however, that her mother was just pretending to be serene and was looking for security in artificial manners rather than choosing to be genuine and honest with her visitors. Because the speaker knew her mother so well, she says that she □could tell the difference.□

Lines 11-15

The third stanza opens with a telling □But,□ which indicates a turn in the speaker's thought process. In this stanza, she recalls the way someone else handles herself in the face of her own mortality. Interestingly, the speaker addresses this person directly, even though the poem indicates that the person has died. The speaker does not give a name or relationship, referring to the person only as F., to whom the poem is dedicated. What is striking to the speaker is how F. conducted herself, planning for the future despite her knowledge that she had no future. She remained optimistic and hopeful to the very end, but with calm instead of desperation. When the speaker says, □I couldn't explain / your genuine smile in the face / of disaster,□ she reveals the fundamental difference between herself and F. While F. has a genuine smile, the speaker sees only the disaster. Clearly, F. did not view her situation as one of disaster. The stanza ends with

an incomplete question that is finished in the next stanza. This break suggests a pause in the speaker's thinking. She ends one stanza with □Was it denial□ (her first assumption), and begins the next with □laced with acceptance?□ (her thoughtful conclusion).

Lines 16-20

The fourth stanza explores more deeply the theme of social masks. The speaker wonders whether F.'s ability to remain peaceful can be attributed to her English heritage, with the idea that the English are very reserved. Pastan draws in a literary allusion to Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette*, in which a young woman, Lucy, hides her strong emotions. Pastan reinforces the theme of social masks in the contrast she sets up between the emotional □fire□ and the □dun-colored dress.□ The brightness of Lucy's emotions remains completely hidden by the dull neutrality of her outer appearance. Similarly, the speaker wonders whether F.'s emotional turmoil was hidden by a calm appearance.

Lines 21-25

As is evident in the final stanza, the speaker concludes that F.'s peaceful countenance was genuine. The speaker tells F., □I want to live the way you did,□ meaning that she wants to find a way to be genuinely optimistic and peaceful about whatever happens in her life. She likens F. in her final days to someone who disregards next year's famine and lays out a lavish banquet of food and wine. The speaker, however, cannot change her nature. Even as she describes the banquet, she is interrupted by the perception of hearing the Cossacks coming. In the last two lines, she writes, □But listen: those are hoofbeats / on the frosty autumn air.□ Again, the poem turns on the word □but,□ and the tone changes completely. The hoofbeats might be those of the Cossacks' horses, indicating that the speaker is unable to surrender fully to the fantasy of living as F. lived. The danger, real or perceived, is always a few steps behind her.

Themes

Pessimism

The speaker in □The Cossacks□ is a pessimistic person, a fact she reveals in the first stanza. The first line describes her feeling that demise is always on the way. While she makes this statement as a comment about the Jewish community from which she comes, the poem is really about her own feeling that the worst awaits her. Perhaps she feels comfort or justification in her feelings by being part of a collective mind-set, which is why she claims that her pessimism is part of her culture. Regardless of why she feels the way she does, her grim outlook on life shapes her experience of life. Most of the first stanza describes that experience; she assumes that a spot on her own arm is the beginning of cancer, and she chooses to spend New Year's Eve totaling up the people who died that year instead of planning for a wonderful new year ahead. Thoughts of death pervade her thinking, and she sees death as a menacing and violent hunter.

The speaker's pessimism also shapes the way she sees other people. In the second stanza, she discusses her mother's final days as death approached. Because she knew her mother so well, she feels confident in saying that the manners her mother exhibited to visitors were merely covering her real feelings. In the third stanza, she wonders whether her friend adopted the same strategy. She wonders whether her friend's serenity in her final days was denial or repressed feelings. Because the speaker holds such a pessimistic view of death, she interprets other people's experience through that lens. Even at the end of the poem, when she claims to want to embrace optimism and hope, she cannot help but feel the impending doom of death.

Social Masks

In describing her mother's death, the speaker recalls visitors coming and being greeted by superficial chat about books and vacation destinations. The speaker says her mother displayed □serenity / as a form of manners.□ Rather than engage visitors in meaningful ways that might give them closure and peace, her mother prefers the safety of small talk. She does not want to show the emotions□fear, regret, uncertainty, or sadness□that would be expected at such a time. What is particularly interesting about her mother is that she has nothing to lose in being honest with her friends and family at this time. She is facing death, so there would be no consequences of sharing her true feelings with them, yet she chooses to remain confined within the comfort and familiarity of idle chat. Her social mask seems to be such a part of her personality that, even in her final hours, she cannot remove it.

In contrast, F. has no use for a social mask because, in her final hours, she has genuine peace. She makes plans for a future that will include her, perhaps for the benefit of those who will carry on without her. F. chooses to spend her time engaged in something meaningful, even if her plans will not be fulfilled. Perhaps F. is playing out important

□what if□ scenarios, or perhaps she is letting her friends and family know that she expects them to continue living satisfying lives without her. Whatever her reasons, she occupies her final days with something more meaningful than shallow discussions of books and travel, as the speaker's mother chose to do. The speaker can tell the difference between her mother and F., even though they both show serenity in their times of crises. The reader can assume that the speaker has this insight because she, too, struggles with her own social mask, but her awareness of it (as evident in the poem) indicates her desire to live without it.

Style

Metaphor

Known for her use of metaphor, Pastan uses powerful images in □The Cossacks□ to portray death. The dominant metaphor in the poem is the representation of the Cossacks as death itself. It is a particularly strong metaphor because it reveals precisely how the speaker views death. Death has been portrayed in numerous ways by poets, and while others may see it variously as a peaceful figure, a welcome figure, or even a worthy adversary, Pastan's speaker views death as a ruthless mercenary who actively pursues her. Because Pastan refers to her own Judaic background in the first line, the image of the Cossacks adds an element of terror. The Cossacks massacred Russian Jews in the nineteenth century, so they represent cruelty and persecution to Pastan and her speaker. In the first line, the speaker states, □For Jews, the Cossacks are always coming.□ She immediately describes assuming that she has melanoma and her activity of counting the dead. Both of these are, in the speaker's mind, examples of the Cossacks who are coming or have already come. Pastan brings the poem full circle when, in the last two lines, she writes, □But listen: those are hoofbeats / on the frosty autumn air.□ This essentially restates the first line and gives the metaphor another level of panic. By demanding that the reader listen and feel the cold air, using the senses to reinforce the metaphor, Pastan adds drama to the reader's experience of the poem. The final lines have an ominous feel, and the speaker seems to be warning the reader against deadly danger.

In the last stanza, Pastan introduces another metaphor in which she describes death as an imminent famine. She admires F. for the way she planned for the famine by having a sumptuous banquet, complete with wine and music. It is an image of celebration and carefree delight, rather than sorrow and dread. The metaphor of death as a famine is effective, as it portrays the nothingness of death and the emptiness felt by the surviving loved ones. The counterbalance of that metaphor with one of a banquet gives the reader a concise illustration of F.'s response to the realization of her own death. She chose to live fully the rest of the time she had left, and that is what the speaker struggles to be able to do.

Symbolism

Just as Pastan uses imagery to reinforce metaphor, she uses imagery to give dimension to symbolism in □The Cossacks.□ The dark spot on her skin brings the speaker to assume that she has cancer, which provides important insight into the speaker's thinking. These spots, made by the sun, stand for the everyday occurrences that seem harmless to many people but represent death to the speaker. When her mother lies dying, she speaks of □books / and travel□ with her visitors. Books symbolize secondhand knowledge or escapist experience, and travel represents firsthand knowledge through experience. In her final days, the mother discusses on a superficial

level things that are knowable, rather than revealing her emotions or sharing reflections on her life. In the fourth stanza, Pastan alludes to Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* and the main character, Lucy, who could control the expression of her own strong feelings. Lucy makes the choice to wear a social mask and to control feelings rather than be controlled by feelings, and her character represents this choice. Pastan ends her poem with a line rich in symbolism. She writes that the □hoofbeats / on the frosty autumn air□ can be heard. Cold often signifies harshness and lack of emotion, and autumn is highly symbolic as a season when living things lose their color and lushness and seem to die.

Historical Context

Jewish American Literature

The field of Jewish American literature as an area of academic study began to take shape in the twentieth century. Literary scholars who study the work of Jewish writers have focused more on the careers of playwrights such as Arthur Miller and novelists such as J. D. Salinger (whose father was Jewish), Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth. To a more limited extent, poets (most notably, Allen Ginsberg and Karl Shapiro) have received a degree of critical and scholarly attention in this field. There is no doubt that the contributions of Jewish writers have shaped American literature in important ways. Among the best-known writers are Woody Allen, Isaac Asimov, Paul Auster, Judy Blume, Betty Friedan, Joseph Heller, E. L. Doctorow, and Harold Bloom.

Many scholars of Jewish American literature examine questions of Jewish identity as it pertains to living in America and look at the ways in which the long-standing traditions of the faith and culture survive in this country. As the field grows, scholars are also exploring such aspects of the culture as linguistics, religion, politics, and social issues. In looking at the works of Jewish writers across genres and circumstances, scholars note certain themes that seem to characterize this body of work, including violence, intergenerational struggle, and guilt.

Cossacks

Derived from the Turkic word *kazak*, the word *Cossack* means □free-booter□ or □vagabond.□ The original Cossacks formed settlements in the Don region of Russia during the fifteenth century as groups of mercenaries and fugitives looking for a place to escape the reach of authority. The largest group was always the Don Cossacks, but other groups (Zaporozhian Cossacks, Terek Cossacks, and others) formed as well. Most of the Cossacks were of Russian descent, with some having Turkic or Kalmyk roots.

Although the Cossacks retained territorial and political autonomy, they eventually forged a relationship with the Russian government to act as a military group in exchange for needed goods and money. In this capacity, they helped defend the Russian border and carry out various military objectives. During the seventeenth century, the government tried to tighten control and even asked that fugitives be returned. The Cossacks saw these attempts to assert authority over them as an affront. This event put distance in the relationship between the government and the Cossacks until 1738, when the Don Cossacks' chief commander was no longer elected but was appointed by the Russian government. This led to a series of events that ultimately resulted in the Cossacks' becoming part of the Russian military proper. By the turn of the century, Cossacks had equal military ranking within the Russian army. Military service was a way of life; enlisted Cossacks served a thirty-year term until 1875, when the term was reduced to

twenty years. Young Cossack men were sworn into service as a group, and discipline was harsh.

The Cossacks were notorious for their willingness to wield power to its fullest extent. The Russian government assigned them to crush rebellion and slaughter Jews during pogroms. Fifty-seven regiments served in World War I, but the twentieth century saw the relationship between the government and the Cossacks deteriorate. By World War II, they were outdated and disbanded.

As a people, the Cossacks were rugged and strict. They originally supported themselves through fishing, hunting, animal husbandry, and collecting loot from their raids. Their relationship with the government enabled them to earn cash, grain, liquor, and weaponry. In the eighteenth century, they added agriculture to their economy. While their religion was Russian Orthodoxy, they incorporated folklore and superstition into religious tradition. Military heroics were very important to the Cossacks, and they kept the stories of heroism alive through the oral tradition. When they celebrated with singing and dancing, they usually sang about battles.

Critical Overview

Over the course of her lengthy career, which began in the late 1950s, Pastan has earned a loyal following of readers and critics alike. For her exalting of domestic subjects and her spare style, she has been compared to Emily Dickinson. For her appreciation of nature, its character, and its relationship to people, she has been compared to Walt Whitman. And for her psychological insights, she has been compared to Edgar Allan Poe. In *Contemporary Poets*, Jay S. Paul remarks, □Like Poe, Pastan has been conscious of the limits of the mind and the impossibility of exceeding them.□ Paul also notes that Pastan's perspective is of someone who is very aware of her own human fallibility. He writes that she □has long seen herself as Eve□one of the fallen.□ Paul praises the fact that Pastan's □vision has been consistent throughout her books.□ In *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Benjamin Franklin V notes that Pastan's □ability to create memorable images and her penchant for examining life's unpleasant emotions□ have been characteristic of her poetry since her first collection, *A Perfect Circle of Sun*. When Pastan won the 2003 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, one of the most lucrative prizes awarded to American poets, the staff of *Poetry* extended its congratulations to her, □thanking her for her consistently excellent contributions to American poetry over four decades.□

Critics praise *The Last Uncle*, in which □The Cossacks□ appears. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer commends her □fluent, accessible lyric seriousness, finding in seasonal and domestic properties . . . signs of mortality, gratitude, and wonder.□ *Library Journal* 's Louis McKee writes, □Pastan has done a good job of turning our attention to what really matters. . . . Pastan's poems are always worthy of our attention.□ The themes portrayed in □The Cossacks□ are among those that critics have long appreciated in Pastan's work. Franklin comments, □Pastan frequently observes that pleasing exteriors conceal death's roots,□ a prevailing message in □The Cossacks.□ In his concluding comments on Pastan's career, Franklin writes, □Pastan deserves serious attention for her finely wrought dark comments on the human condition. Not spectacular, she is a solid poet whose work speaks to all of mankind. Her verse will endure.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Bussey is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she discusses Pastan's poem The Cossacks with emphasis on the speaker's preoccupation with death.

Pastan's poem "The Cossacks" conveys images of mercenaries, small talk, manners, final days, strong emotions, a plain dress, a banquet, and a crisp autumn day. It is evidence of Pastan's skill as a poet that these wide-ranging images and ideas converge to give unified insight into the speaker's preoccupation with death. The speaker sees death not as the peaceful and inevitable end of a person's life but as a cruel enemy constantly on the hunt for her. Because the speaker's voice has such depth and is so well developed, the various images form a unified message of fear. In less accomplished hands, such differing thoughts and images would result in confusion, but in Pastan's hands, each line creates a voice that is consistent, believable, and sympathy-evoking. In fact, the voice is so consistent that even when the speaker tries to embrace a new way of relating to death, her deep-seated fear resurfaces.

The speaker addresses F. (to whom the poem is dedicated) directly, as if she were still alive, yet the reader knows by the end of the poem that F. has died. So, from the beginning of the poem, the speaker is grappling with death; she is addressing someone she has already grieved. Perhaps this expression as poetry is part of her grieving process. Her motivation for expressing these thoughts is never made clear, nor is it at all apparent how much time has passed since she lost F. The speaker's matter-of-fact tone indicates that she has gone through the most immediate, painful stages of grief, so it is reasonable to assume that she has arrived at a point where she can analyze F.'s death. It is clear from the progression of the poem that the speaker wants to learn from F.'s graceful acceptance of death. She does not understand F.'s fearless and peaceful response to what she herself sees as terror and tragedy, but she sees clearly enough to understand that she wants to change this aspect of herself. She wants to be able to disarm death with a genuine smile, as F. did.

The speaker opens the poem with an ominous statement: "For Jews, the Cossacks are always coming." The Cossacks the speaker refers to were a military group of Russian mercenaries who asserted their power by putting down rebellion, massacring Jews, and carrying out other acts of extreme force. Given the history of the Cossacks and the Jews, the poem's opening statement reveals the speaker's sense of powerlessness and terror. It soon becomes apparent that the Cossacks are a metaphor for death, which makes the first line even more revealing. The speaker feels that she is constantly being sought by death, and she sees death as an active force that is cruel and emotionless. While the speaker claims that Jews in general are treated this way by death, or at least feel that they are, what is really at stake in the poem is the speaker's individual preoccupation. She might not need to question her preoccupation if she can convince herself that it is merely a cultural inheritance, but regardless of its origins it haunts her.

By the second line, the speaker is talking about herself directly. Her preoccupation with death is evident in that she mentions death on every other line of the first stanza. "Cossacks" refers to death itself, "melanoma" refers to a possible carrier of death, and "annual dead" refers to those who have already succumbed to death in the preceding year. In the speaker's mind, death is all around her. It is as far away as the spirits of those who have died, and it is as near as her own arm. The speaker's twisted thinking about death is expressed in the oxymoron of celebrating a holiday by counting how many people she knows who have died over the course of the preceding year. Either she means this sarcastically, or she means it as celebration of the fact that they were the ones who died, not her.

In the second stanza, the speaker recalls the way her mother handled her crisis of death and contrasts it with the way F. did. Both women knew they were dying, and both seemed to accept death with grace and serenity. Because the speaker was close to both of them, however, she knows that the truths of the two women were very different. She knows that her mother only pretended to be peaceful and accepting, preferring manners and niceties to moments of intensity and honesty with the people she loved. Her mother seems to have chosen to behave according to a code of manners as much for the comfort of her visitors as for herself. The reader cannot help but wonder, however, whether the visitors would not have preferred to connect at a deeper level than the speaker's mother allowed. In her mother, the speaker sees the same fear she herself feels. Why would her mother put on such an artificial countenance if the truth were not too terrifying to accept? The speaker sees through her mother's act, but she does not judge her for it.

In contrast to her mother, the speaker recalls, in the third stanza, the genuine peacefulness that F. displayed during her time of crisis. She remembers watching F. plan for a future that would never come and embrace life fully to the very end. The speaker admits that this response to death confused her: "I couldn't explain / your genuine smile in the face / of disaster." Her lack of understanding derives from the fact that "disaster" is in the eye of the beholder. The speaker sees everything related to death as the ultimate disaster, but F. clearly did not see it in the same way. Although it was F.'s death, it was actually the speaker's disaster. This is why she could not explain the genuine smile or the planning for the future. The speaker cannot help but wonder if the smile might not have been an outward sign of some kind of denial, but, as she moves into the fourth stanza, she entertains the idea that F. may have reached acceptance. When she wonders whether F. was actually hiding strong feelings, like Lucy in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, she knows better. What is unsaid is that the social mask she remembers from *Villette* is actually the type worn by her mother.

The speaker seems to have a sense that people understand crisis as their ancestors did. She aligns her fear of death with her Judaism, and in the fourth stanza she considers F.'s controlled emotion as a possible result of her "generations of being English." This provides an important insight into the speaker, because it suggests that she does not feel responsible for her own feelings about death but believes that they are an inescapable part of her culture. She clearly feels a strong connection to her heritage, but in the fifth stanza, she seems prepared to forge her own path.

In the fifth and last stanza, the speaker decides that she would rather face death as F. did rather than as her own mother did. This will not be an easy task, given that the speaker identifies with her mother's fear of death so readily. She has a high level of self-knowledge that includes cultural self-knowledge, but she wants to choose better for herself so that she can approach death with contentment and genuine serenity. She sees death as an inevitable famine (another disaster image), but she deeply admires the way F. disregarded disaster and held the metaphorical equivalent of a lavish banquet. This is an actual celebratory image that overpowers the false celebration of New Year's Eve in the first stanza. The banquet is almost tangible to the speaker; she can see that there is wine, music, and ten courses. It is an inviting image in which the speaker longs to participate. But equally tangible to her is the threatening sound of hoofbeats. Are these the Cossacks approaching? The thumping of the hoofbeats could very well be the speaker's own heartbeat quickening again at the thought of actually facing death. She knows death is coming, and her pessimism drives her to assume that it is coming soon. She is not prepared for it, and she is not ready to accept or embrace it. This is a pivotal moment for the speaker. Her conflict has peaked. She has to choose whether to surrender to her own nature and continue to live in fear, looking over her shoulder for death, or to fight her nature, assert her will, and strive to be like F. The poem ends here, and Pastan leaves the reader to speculate on the speaker's choice.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on □The Cossacks,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

In □The Cossacks,□ Pastan uses Cossacks as an effective metaphor for death. What would you choose as a metaphor for death? Think of something that is specific to your experience, background, or feelings so that the metaphor will be uniquely yours. Write a poem developing your metaphor.

In □The Cossacks,□ the speaker refers to denial and acceptance, two of the five stages of grief. One of Pastan's previous collections, *The Five Stages of Grief* (1978), is arranged to parallel the five stages of grief described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in *On Death and Dying*. Research *On Death and Dying* or Kübler-Ross's *On Grief and Grieving* to better understand the five stages a person goes through when faced with death. Take into account not just the person who is dying but also the loved ones who are preparing for their own loss. Write an essay about what you have learned.

Everyone has worn a social mask at some time, whether to get through a life-and-death crisis, to deal with peer pressure, or to fulfill someone else's set of expectations. Recall a time when you felt it necessary to wear a social mask. Write a brief script in which you retell the experience of that time, putting your true thoughts and feelings in italics or as asides in parentheses to the audience.

Based on your reading and interpretation of □The Cossacks,□ how do you think the speaker will handle her own death when her time comes? In the poem, her feelings are conflicted as she struggles against her own nature. Do you think she will be like her mother, like F., or different from both of them? Lead a group discussion on the topic, and be sure to support your arguments with excerpts from the poem.

Find a plot summary and character profile for Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette*. Which of the three women in □The Cossacks□ (the mother, F., or the speaker) do you think is most like Brontë's Lucy? Which do you think is least like her? Is there any commonality among the four? Write up your conclusions in an essay, or create a chart or poster showing the similarities and differences you have found among the characters.

What Do I Read Next?

Edited by Taryn Benbow-Pfalzgraf, *American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present* (2000) profiles thirteen hundred writers spanning the full history of the United States and including all genres.

Edited by Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose: Poems, Prose, Reviews, and Criticism* (1993) gives readers the best of Rich's poetry and essays. Although Rich's background is very similar to Pastan's and both women are respected writers, their bodies of work are very different.

Mary Oliver's *New and Selected Poems: Volume Two* (2005) is hailed as a fitting companion to Oliver's National Book Award-winning first volume. Here, she offers her readers the Robert Frost-like poetry they have come to love, coupled with the perspective of wisdom and age.

Pastan's first book of poetry, *A Perfect Circle of Sun* (1971), takes the reader through a different season in each of the four sections of the book. Pastan is concerned less with commenting on how the seasons relate to nature and more on how they affect people's feelings and experiences.

Nominated for the National Book Award, Pastan's *PM/AM: New and Selected Poems* (1982) prompted many critics to comment on how she had matured as a poet. These poems reflect the passing of a day from the morning to the night, with special attention to poems drawn from dream fragments.

In the nineteenth-century novel *The Cossacks* (originally published in 1862), the master Russian writer Leo Tolstoy tells a story about a young aristocrat, Dmitri Olenin, and his quest for happiness and purpose. When he joins the military, he falls in love with a Cossack girl who is betrothed to a fierce Cossack soldier.

Further Study

Berenbaum, Michael, *After Tragedy and Triumph: Modern Jewish Thought and the American Experience*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

As the project director for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Berenbaum has unique expertise on how this and other important chapters in Jewish history figure into modern American Jewish thought. This book compiles thirteen essays that give insight into the complexities of the topic.

Chametzky, Jules, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein, eds., *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, Norton, 2000.

This comprehensive anthology includes biographical sketches and work samples of 145 writers from all genres. The editors give a full picture, from the seventeenth century to the present, of the literary contributions made by Jewish Americans.

Kooser, Ted, *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets*, University of Nebraska Press, 2005.

Known for his accessible writing style, Kooser has earned a reputation as a poet of stature and, as of 2006, has served two terms as poet laureate of the United States. In this book, he draws from his many years of experience as a poet to offer easy-to-follow advice for beginners.

Nelson, Deborah, ed., □Gender and Culture in the 1950s: Special Issue,□ *Women's Quarterly Review*, Vol. 33, Nos. 3 and 4, 2005.

In this double issue, Nelson brings together writers on a variety of topics to give an overview of what life was like for women in the 1950s. The pressures and expectations women faced are discussed, along with articles about women who made their own ways in a world that promoted conformity.

O'Rourke, Shane, *Warriors and Peasants: The Don Cossacks in Late Imperial Russia*, Macmillan, 2000.

O'Rourke provides a thorough look at the history, culture, politics, and family lives of the largest group of Cossacks, the Don Cossacks.

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Franklin, Benjamin, V, □Linda Pastan,□ in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 5, *American Poets since World War II, First Edition*, edited by Donald J. Greiner, Gale Research, 1980, pp. 158-63.

McKee, Louis, Review of *The Last Uncle*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 127, No. 2, February 1, 2002, p. 106.

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Pastan, Linda, □The Cossacks,□ in *The Last Uncle*, W. W. Norton, 2004, p. 15.

Paul, Jay S., □Linda Pastan: Overview,□ in *Contemporary Poets*, 6th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 1996.

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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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