Darwin in 1881 Study Guide

Darwin in 1881 by Gjertrud Schnackenberg

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Introduction

Gjertrud Schnackenberg published "Darwin in 1881" in her first collection of poems, *Portraits and Elegies,* in 1982. This book—sometimes referred to as a "chapbook" because of its short length—is divided into three sections, and "Darwin in 1881" makes up the entire second section. All three parts relate in one way or another to history, the first consisting of a series of elegies to her father, the third tracing the history of a Massachusetts farmhouse nearly two hundred years old, and the middle depicting the life of Charles Darwin one year before his death. This latter poem is layered with two primary allusions. A subtle reference compares Darwin's life to the poet's father's life, but the more obvious allusion is to Shakespeare's character Pros-pero from *The Tempest,* whom Schnackenberg also compares to Darwin.

To the poet, all three men—her father, Darwin, and Prospero—accomplished great things in their lives and had settled into times of quiet reflection before their deaths. In the poem, there is no description of the father's final days, but Schnackenberg relies heavily on an examination of Darwin's famous voyage to the Galápagos Islands, his controversial theory of evolution and natural selection, and his years, after the journey, at home in England. By blending in references to Prospero, who lives on an island for many years before returning to his native Milan, Italy, Schnackenberg presents a cohesive, poetic study, full of rich imagery, that points out the importance of history, science, and family in making sense of human life.

The characters here have all done remarkable things with their intellectual powers, and each has reached a point of saying farewell to his ambitious life in favor of a more solemn meditation on what the accomplishments have meant.

Author Biography

Gjertrud Schnackenberg was born on August 27, 1953, inTacoma, Washington. Her family was of Norwegian descent and Lutheran religious faith. Walter Schnackenberg, her father, was a professor of Russian and medieval history atPacific Lutheran University, and his early death in 1973 had a profound and lasting impact on his twenty-year-old daughter. As a youngster, Schnackenberg shared a close, warm relationship with her father, and he had a greater influence on her than anyone else in her life. They enjoyed night-fishing and other outdoor activities together, as well as quiet times of reading and study. The older Schnackenberg was a highly intellectual man, who passed on his love of history to his daughter. At nineteen, as a student at Mount Holyoke College, she began to write poetry, and her father's death the following year would become the subject of her first collection, *Portraits and Elegies,* in which "Darwin in 1881" first appeared.

Schanckenberg's talent as a poet was immediately recognized by her instructors and other members of the poetry community. She won the distinguished Glascock Award for poetry in both 1973 and 1974 and graduated summa cum laude fromMount Holyoke in 1975. Four years later, she received a Radcliffe College fellowship, and in 1983 she lived inItaly on an American Academy-Institute of Arts and Letters Rome fellowship. With the publication of her first collection in 1982, Schnackenberg earned her place among the best young writers on the American scene at the time. In spite of the many accolades, however, her work still reflected the deep feeling of loss that she felt over her father's death. *Portraits and Elegies* and her subsequent publications include direct responses to her sadness in the form of elegies to her father as well as more subtle allusions, or references, using history as the dominant subject□history, of course, being the former professor's field of teaching. In October 1987, Schnackenberg married Robert Nozick, a philosophy professor at Harvard, and the two make their home in Boston.

Poem Text

Sleepless as Prospero back in his bedroom

In Milan, with all his miracles

Reduced to sailors' tales,

He sits up in the dark. The islands loom.

His seasickness upwells,

Silence creeps by in memory as it crept

By him on water, while the sailors slept,

From broken eggs and vacant tortoise shells.

His voyage around the cape of middle age

Comes, with a feat of sight, to a close,

The same way Prospero's

Ended before he left the stage

To be led home across the blue-white sea,

When he had spoken of the clouds and globe,

Breaking his wand, and taking off his robe:

Knowledge increases unreality.

He quickly dresses.

Form wavers like his shadow on the stair

As he descends, in need of air

To cure his dizziness,

Down past the shipsunk emptiness

Of grownup children's rooms and hallways where

The family portraits blindly stare,

All haunted by each other's likenesses.

Outside, the orchard and a piece of moon

Are islands, he an island as he walks,

Brushing against weed stalks.

By hook and plume

The seeds gathering on his trouser legs

Are archipelagoes, like nests he sees

Shadowed in branching, ramifying trees,

Each with unique expressions in its eggs.

Different islands conjure

Different beings; different beings call

From different isles. And after all

His scrutiny of Nature

All he can see

Is how it will grow small, fade, disappear,

A coastline fading from a traveler

Aboard a survey ship. Slowly,

As coasts depart,

Nature had left behind a naturalist

Bound for a place where species don't exist,

Where no emergence has a counterpart.

He's heard from friends

About the other night, the banquet hall

Ringing with bravos□like a curtain call,

He thinks, when the performance ends,

Failing to summon from the wings

An actor who had lost his taste for verse,

Having beheld, in larger theaters,

Much greater banquet-vanishings

Without the quaint device and thunderclap

Required in Act 3.

He wrote, Let your indulgence set me free,

To the Academy, and took a nap

Beneath a London Daily tent,

Then puttered on his hothouse walk

Watching his orchids beautifully stalk

Their unreturning paths, where each descendant

Is the last□

Their inner staircases

Haunted by vanished insect faces

So tiny, so intolerably vast.

And, while they gave his proxy the award,

He dined in Downe and stayed up rather late

For backgammon with his beloved mate

Who reads his books and is, quite frankly, bored.

Now, done with beetle jaws and beaks of gulls

And bivalve hinges, now, utterly done,

One miracle remains, and only one.

An ocean swell of sickness rushes, pulls,

He leans against the fence

And lights a cigarette and deeply draws,

Done with fixed laws,

Done with experiments

Within his greenhouse heaven where

His offspring, Frank, for half the afternoon

Played, like an awkward angel, his bassoon

Into the humid air

So he could tell

If sound would make a Venus's-Flytrap close.

And, done for good with scientific prose,

That raging hell

Of tortured grammars writhing on their stakes,

He'd turned to his memoirs, chuckling to write

About his boyhood in an upright

Home: a boy preferring gartersnakes

To schoolwork, a lazy, strutting liar

Who quite provoked her aggravated look,

Shushed in the drawingroom behind her book,

His bossy sister itching with desire

To tattletale□yes, that was good.

But even then, much like the conjurer

Grown cranky with impatience to abjure

All his gigantic works and livelihood

In order to immerse

Himself in tales where he could be the man

In Once upon a time there was a man,

He'd quite by chance beheld the universe:

A disregarded game of chess

Between two love-dazed heirs

Who fiddle with the tiny pairs

Of statues in their hands, while numberless

Abstract unseen

Combinings on the silent board remain

Unplayed forever when they leave the game

To turn, themselves, into a king and queen.

Now, like the coming day,

Inhaled smoke illuminates his nerves.

He turns, taking the sandwalk as it curves

Back to the yard, the house, the entrance way

Where, not to waken her,

He softly shuts the door,

And leans against it for a spell before

He climbs the stairs, holding the banister,

Up to their room: there

Emma sleeps, moored

In illusion, blown past the storm he conjured

With his book, into a harbor

Where it all comes clear,

Where island beings leap from shape to shape

As to escape

Their terrifying turns to disappear.

He lies down on the quilt,

He lies down like a fabulous-headed

Fossil in a vanished riverbed,

In ocean-drifts, in canyon floors, in silt,

In lime, in deepening blue ice,

In cliffs obscured as clouds gather and float;

He lies down in his boots and overcoat,

And shuts his eyes.

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Plot Summary

Lines 1-3

The opening lines of "Darwin in 1881" introduce the comparison between Darwin and Prospero, using the word "as" to indicate a likeness. In *The Tempest,* Shakespeare's last play, Prospero, the Duke of Milan, is overthrown by his brother, Antonio, and then put to sea with his young daughter to perish. As it turns out, however, Prospero and the child are shipwrecked on an island where magic and sorcery are commonplace thanks to lively spirits such as the friendly Ariel and the mischievous Caliban. Prospero acquires magical powers by donning a magician's robe and carrying a wand, and he performs many tricks over the twelve years that he and his daughter live on the island. Among Prospero's feats is his conjuring, through Ariel, a terrific storm, or tempest, bringing a ship carrying Antonio and a party of others fromMilan crashing into the island. Through various magic tricks, Prospero and his spirits frighten the stranded newcomers, but the magicians eventually reveal who it is behind the sorcery. When Antonio realizes his brother and niece are still alive, he repents his act of usurping Prospero's throne and begs his brother to forgive him. Believing Antonio is sincere, Prospero makes peace with him, and all the human inhabitants of the island agree to return home where Prospero will take his rightful place as Duke of Milan. With Ariel's magical provision of friendly sea breezes, the party sails safely home on a rebuilt ship.

The references to "his bedroom" and "his miracles" in lines 1 and 2 refer to Prospero, who has given up his magical powers to live a sedate life inItaly. His miraculous adventures and accomplishments are now only a legend of "sailors' tales."

Lines 4-8

The "He" in line 4 refers toDarwin. The islands that "loom" in his mind are those he visited on his five-year expedition, beginning in 1831, as a naturalist (now more commonly called a botanist or zoologist) aboard the *H. M. S. Beagle.* Most likely, the islands are the Galápagos group where he made his greatest discoveries of the many varieties of plant and animal species. This voyage was a miserable one forDarwin, physically. He spent many seasick days in turbulent waters and reportedly contracted a tropical disease after being bitten by an insect. Whether or not that was the cause of his ailment, it is true thatDarwin spent the rest of his life battling chronic stomach pains and nausea. Lines 6 and 7 contain the first direct allusion to lines from *The Tempest.* In act 1, scene 2, it is music, not "memory," that creeps by as Ferdinand describes Ariel's song: "This music crept by me upon the waters." The "broken eggs" and "vacant tortoiseshells" refer to fossils thatDarwin found on his trip.

Lines 9-16

The actual cape that Darwin voyaged around was Cape Horn at the southern tip ofSouth America. The poem, however, speaks of a time whenDarwin has already rounded "the cape of middle age" and is well into his declining years. As the journey of his life comes to a close, he experiences a "feat of insight," meaning he has accomplished a true understanding of something. That something is revealed in line 16, which states that he now realizes that "Knowledge increases unreality." This statement implies that sometimes people can learn so much and be so highly intelligent that they lose touch with the real world. Before that revelation, however, Schnackenberg makes another comparison to Prospero whose own voyage "Ended before he left the stage," referring to his relinquishment of the magical powers that his robe and wand afforded him. The Duke's speech concerning "the clouds and globe" comes from act 4, scene 1, in which he states, "the great globe itself, / Yea, all which inherit it, shall dissolve / And . . . leave not a rack [wispy cloud] behind." Also, compare line 15 to Prospero's statement in Act 5, Scene 1, in which he says, "I'll break my staff, / Bury it certain fathoms in the earth."

Lines 17-24

Darwin's continuing illness often left him with insomnia as well as nausea. This second stanza depicts a sleepless night when he must go outside for some fresh air to "cure his dizziness." All his children have left home, and he likens their vacant rooms to "shipsunk emptiness." Lines 18 ("Form wavers like his shadow") and 24 ("All haunted by each other's likenesses") are references to Darwin's work with evolutionary theory and his study of why species are alike in some ways and different in others.

Lines 25-35

These lines rely on simile□a comparison of two dissimilar objects□and further allusion toDarwin's journey to various islands. On this sleepless night, he is so alone that the orchard, the moon, and even he himself seem like separate islands. The seeds that stick to his pant legs are "archipelagoes," or groups of islands, and the trees he observes are "ramifying," meaning their branches divide into new branches the way species divide and form new species in evolution. The nests he sees within the branches hold eggs "with unique expressions," just as plants and animals have developed unique looks and abilities over thousands of years. Lines 34 and 35 refer directly toDarwin's amazing discovery in the Galápagos that giant tortoises who roamed the islands were so distinct in their development that the human inhabitants could tell at a glance from which island one of the animals came.

Lines 36-44

The second half of this stanza again refers toDarwin's advancing age and an acceptance that his life is drawing to a close. Although he does not know that he will die the following year, he feels that after all the time he has spent studying nature, it is time to accept that dying is like watching nature "grow small, fade, disappear." This feeling is comparable to a traveler on a ship watching a coastline become fainter as the vessel moves farther out to sea. Upon his death, nature□the thing studied□ will leave the one who studied it behind. Lines 43 and 44 imply that in the afterlife, there are no separate species and no need for something new to emerge, for there is no "counterpart."

Lines 45-54

Darwin did not become a recluse after his return from the expedition, but he did spend most of his time at home continuing his studies and developing his theory of natural selection. In spite of the controversy caused by the publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859,Darwin was highly praised by most fellow naturalists. These lines refer to an apparent award ceremony thatDarwin declined to attend but that he heard a report on from friends. Schnackenberg comparesDarwin to an actor playing Prospero, who refuses to return to the stage for his curtain call, regardless of the "bravos" from the audience. There is weariness inDarwin and the actor implied in this description, both tired of the spotlight and the command to perform. Lines 52-54 refer to act 3, scene 3, of *The Tempest* in which Prospero has conjured up a trick banquet for unsuspecting guests only to have the feast disappear before their eyes when they try to eat. On stage, there is the sound of thunder and the flash of lightning as Ariel appears in the form of a harpy, "claps his wings upon the table; and, with a quaint device, the banquet vanishes."

Lines 55-64

This section begins with another direct allusion to Prospero. The final two lines of *The Tempest,* spoken by the Duke of Milan in the epilogue, are "As you from crimes would pardon'd be / Let your indulgence set me free." Prospero is tired of performing magic tricks to entertain the audience, and so he asks them to release him from the obligation. In "Darwin in 1881," the tired naturalist sends a note to the "Academy" (the Royal Society for the Improving of Natural Knowledge) imparting the same sentiment□he is no longer interested in the public attention and accolades for his work. After a nap with a newspaper folded over his face,Darwin meanders by his greenhouse where he considers the evolutionary paths of orchids and how the insects that feed on them may be physically tiny but their numbers and their ability to survive are incredibly large.

Lines 65-68

The final four lines of this stanza reiterateDarwin's sedentary, domestic retirement. He prefers letting someone else accept the Academy's award for him while he spends a quiet evening at home ("Downe," in Kent,England) having dinner and playing backgammon with his wife. The wife, a reportedly very religious woman, is not impressed with her husband's theories of evolution.

Lines 69-71

These lines reflect some of the objects thatDarwin had observed over the years to help him learn about the development of animal species insect jaws, bird beaks, and the hinged shells of bivalve mollusks such as clams and oysters. The key word here is "done," mentioned twice in these lines to emphasize the end of the most spectacular part ofDarwin's life. But still "One miracle remains," and it is not revealed until line 86 when it turns out to be the writing of his memoirs.

Lines 72-85

The scene here returns toDarwin's nighttime walk through his gardens while his stomach illness still swells up like seasickness. As he leans on a fence smoking a cigarette, he reminisces about one of his sons playing a bassoon in the greenhouse to see if sound can affect the movement of a plant.Darwin had ten children, seven of whom survived into adulthood. When they all lived at home in Downe,Darwin let his sons and daughters act as young research assistants, including the greenhouse scene portrayed here. Francis (Frank)Darwin would become a scientist as well, and in 1880 his father published *The Power of Movement in Plants.* These lines also use the word "done" three more times, reiterating Darwin's relinquishment of "fixed laws," "experiments," and "scientific prose," the latter of which he likens to a kind of hell where many scientific theories have been condemned by those who think them evil or sacrilegious.

Lines 86-93

These lines reveal the "miracle" thatDarwin wants to accomplish before his death. He wants to write down the stories of his boyhood, a feat he has not yet attempted considering the years he has spent composing scientific theory. His mother died when he was eight years old, and he was brought up by a sister who tried to guide him in the direction of serious study in an "upright / Home." Although he attempted both medicine and theology, he did not feel inclined to become either a doctor or a minister. Instead, to the chagrin of his sister, he preferred studying snakes and bugs. This memory is a delightful one for the aging naturalist.

Lines 94-99

These lines allude again to Prospero, "the conjurer / Grown cranky with impatience" to give up his magical powers and live simply and serenely like a man in a "Once upon a time fairy tale."

Lines 100-108

These nine lines present an abstract meditation on the universe and evolutionary theory.Darwin considers the vast knowledge his years of studying nature have given him□in essence, he has "beheld the universe," and he compares it to a game of chess. This is another allusion to *The Tempest* when, in act 5, scene 1, Prospero reveals his daughter and her lover playing the game. Miranda and Ferdinand are the "two love-dazed heirs / Who fiddle with the tiny pairs" of chess pieces, in particular the king and queen. As children of royalty, they will one day "turn, themselves, into a king and queen," but what they leave behind are "numberless / Abstract unseen / Combinings on the silent board." This metaphor refers literally to the countless number of moves that can be made in a game of chess but that are never made before the game ends and figuratively to the different combinations of species that never occur in life because of the process of natural selection. Some possibilities of nature remain "Unplayed forever" in a world where form and order eventually triumph over chaos.

Lines 109-117

The words "coming day" and "illuminates" imply thatDarwin has been outside nearly all night, and now dawn is breaking. This scene portrays his weariness and aging as he is described leaning against the door "for a spell before / He climbs the stairs, holding the banister" on his way back to the bedroom.

Lines 118-124

This description of Emma, Darwin's wife, sleeping uses sea imagery to show her "moored" as a ship to a dock, secure in her "illusion," or dream. Asleep, she is safe from the "storm"Darwin conjured with the publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection.* This, of course, is also an allusion to Prospero who conjured a storm of his own. The "harbor" refers back to the islandsDarwin visited, and lines 122-124 sum up his idea of natural selection, or the survival of the fittest. The island animals "leap from shape to shape" because only the strongest shapes survive, and they want to avoid remaining static in order not to "disappear."

Lines 125-132

"Darwin in 1881" ends with imagery of the geological phenomena that became the basis of his scientific theory. Fossils found on ocean floors and cliffs, in ice, canyons, and so forth, support the idea of evolution, and at the end of his life, Darwin himself is like a "fabulous-headed / Fossil," ready to lie down for a final time.

Themes

Family

The importance of family is at the heart of all three "layers" of "Darwin in 1881"—between Darwin and his wife and children; between Prospero and his daughter and brother; and, of course, between the poet and her father, in whose memory this poem was written. Schnackenberg portrays the main subject, Darwin, as a contemplative, somewhat frail man alternating between thoughts of his accomplishments as a scientist and his personal life as a family man with fond memories of his own childhood. He is ever mindful of the people he loves, taking note of his children's portraits as he descends the stairs in the middle of the night, dizzy and feeling ill. As he walks among the gardens and greenhouses, thinking of his long-ago voyage across the ocean to exotic islands and of the fame he incurred as a result of his studies there, his mind also returns to the life he settled into after the expedition. The greenhouse in particular reminds him of the hours his son Frank spent playing the bassoon "like an awkward angel" to see if the sound could "make a Venus's-Flytrap close." And althoughDarwin is "done for good with scientific prose," he joyfully considers the prospects of writing his memoirs, "chuckling" as he thinks "About his boyhood in an upright / Home," recalling his preference for gartersnakes over schoolwork. He muses over the memory of "His bossy sister itching with desire / To tattletale" and realizes that even though he has "beheld the universe," he really wants only to live a fairy tale life like a man in "Once upon a time there was a man."

Prospero is also a loving father, who brings up his daughter Miranda on an island where they are the only two humans. Perhaps Schnackenberg chose these two characters for the poem because of their very close relationship, which is similar to the one she shared with her own father. The older Schnackenberg was a studious man who loved to read, and Prospero, too, is a man who has surrounded himself with books and taught his child to love them as well. For twelve years, Miranda is the only family member Prospero is with, but when his brother arrives on the island by way of a tempest and shipwreck, he eventually finds a way to forgive Antonio for the terrible acts he committed when they all lived inMilan. Even after being double-crossed and sent out to a sure death on rough seas, Prospero decides that family and forgiveness are more important than anger and revenge. Likely, this theme is prevalent in Schnackenberg's work, not only because her father was a good man but because losing him gave her an even deeper understanding of the value of being part of a family.

Resolution and Death

Individual responses to growing old and accepting the end of one's life is a common theme in many poems. In "Darwin in 1881," Schnackenberg couples the theme of death with the idea of resolution—the main characters must resolve major issues in their lives before they die. For Prospero, the decision is to give up his magical powers and return

to the career he had rightfully inherited as the Duke of Milan. Although his life on the island has been filled with miraculous events and uncommon companions, he comes to understand that there is something more valuable in the world than magic and cunning and supernatural abilities. In essence, he realizes that peace of mind is the most important gift he can receive, and it will come about only by returning to a normal life as a normal man.

ForDarwin, the resolution is very similar. He has not experienced the power of creating magic, but he has become a world-renowned, controversial figure whose "power" came in the form of developing a theory that changed the way humankind thought about its own origins and development. Other naturalists had considered the same theory long beforeDarwin, but it was his publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* that brought the concept to the public's attention and caused an uproar. In Schnackenberg's poem,Darwin is an elderly man tired of the attention□tired, even, of his own studies and scientific writings. He prefers a quiet evening at home over attending award ceremonies, and he wants to write about his boyhood instead of fossils. He may not have any magical powers to relinquish, but he does resolve to give up science in favor of domestic comforts and peace of mind. Like Prospero,Darwin wants to live out the remainder of his days as a normal man, well out of the public spotlight.

Style

In the 1980s, American poetry took a turn toward a more formal style of writing than the styles of the previous decades. Free verse certainly did not die out, but it did make room for the emergence of a poetic movement termed the new formalism. In this style, poets use specific form, meter, and usually rhyme, and Schnackenberg is recognized as one of the most prominent poets of the movement. "Darwin in 1881" is composed primarily in rhymed quatrains, or a series of four-line groups, following an *a-b-b-a* rhyming pattern. Consider the first four lines of the poem, with the endings "room," "miracles," "tales," and "loom." Here, lines 1 and 4 are identical rhymes, and 2 and 3 are slant, or close, rhymes. The next four lines follow a *b-c-c-b* pattern and consist of two identical rhymes: "upwells" with "tortoiseshells" and "crept" with "slept." This style is seen throughout the poem, although Schnackenberg allows herself the freedom to fluctuate between short, eight-line verses and longer ones, most divisible by four, but occasionally odd-numbered, as in the fifth stanza of this poem. After following the quatrain pattern from lines 69 through 84, suddenly line 85□the last one in the stanza□is actually the beginning of the first quatrain in the next stanza. "Stakes" is partnered with "gartersnakes," and "write" and "upright" are tucked in between. Most likely the typical stanza pattern is broken simply because the line about "tortured grammars" completes the thought begun with "raging hell," and the poet found it more sensible to opt for content over form at this point.

Because Schnackenberg writes very personal, often autobiographical poems, she may be considered a "confessional" poet, such as Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton. What sets Schnackenberg apart, however, is that she tames her emotions and volatile subject matter with the standards of new formalism. The meter and rhyme she employs help to restrain any overly dramatic or sensationalized outbursts that free verse can sometimes allow when the topic is the poet's own grief, anger, depression, and so forth. For this reason, she has been praised for her quiet seriousness even though her poems may be about highly stressful or passionate subjects. In this case, style plays a major role in getting the poem's message across without letting emotion get in the way.

BOOKRAGS

Historical Context

The same year that Charles Darwin published his controversial book *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), another English writer, Charles Dickens, published *A Tale of Two Cities* with the opening lines, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Though Dickens was referring to the era of the French Revolution, the sentiment of the statement also applies to the time in whichDarwin lived *and* a hundred years after his death when Schnackenberg wrote this poem about him. DuringDarwin's lifetime, wars throughout the world were as common as they are today. His life spanned much of the 1800s, and during that century, Britain went to war with France in Spain and Portugal; countries in the Middle East and Far East waged battles, including Singapore, Persia, and China; India was the setting of numerous conflicts; and the young United States of America was anything but united when civil war tore the country apart. Of course, the Industrial Revolution was also underway, bringing about improvements in transportation, communication, and manufacturing, making the lives of many people much better in spite of social or political troubles. Most scientists and a part of the general public commendedDarwin for making remarkable advancements in science, providing insight into biological and botanical mechanisms that would lead to a greater understanding of life itself. Another part called him blasphemous, condemning him for advocating theories that drew people away from God and a belief in the fundamental story of creation. By the 1880s, arguments still occurred between the opposing sides, but the effects of the Industrial Age were undeniable in turning more people's attention to science and technology in spite of religious beliefs.

A century later, Schnackenberg was born in the same year the Korean War ended, and she grew from adolescence to adulthood during the Vietnam War. In 1980, when she was composing the poems that would become a part of her first collection, *Portraits and Elegies,* violence was happening on the streets as much as on the battlefields. Famed Beatle John Lennon was shot dead in front of his home inNew York City, and a year later, both President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II were victims of assassination attempts.Darwin's theory of evolution was still being debated□as it is today□although much of the argument shifted from its authenticity to whether it should be taught in schools. Christian Fundamentalists introduced bills in a number of state legislatures to counteract the 1968 decision by the Supreme Court that any law banning the teaching of evolution was unconstitutional. Fundamentalists argued that evolution in the classroom should be balanced by the teaching of creation as well, and in the 1980s, Arkansas and Louisiana passed acts requiring such a balance in public schools. However, the acts were soon successfully challenged by opponents who said they were a violation of the separation of church and state. In the latter part of the twentieth century, many Christians accepted evolution by natural selection as compatible with religious belief. Even Pope John Paul II acknowledged this in 1981 when he told the Pontifical Academy of Sciences that the Bible should not be taken literally as a book of physics, astronomy, or biology. The Bible, he said, does not "wish to teach how the heavens were made but how one goes to heaven." (The Pope's statement was reprinted in an article on evolution on the Britannica.com web site.)

Though much of Schnackenberg's work, including "Darwin in 1881," concerns mostly individual and personal matters, it generally relates the individual to the world around him or her. Robert McPhillips, writing for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* claims that the poems in *Portraits and Elegies* "present a mature and unified meditation on mortality and the human capacity to impose order on and adduce meaning from life through science, history, family, and poetry." Given the world's conditions in both the poet's and her subject' s times, one can find many examples when order was *not* imposed, resulting in some of the social and political troubles that occurred. But the biological and geological studies that Schnackenberg mentions in theDarwin poem reveal a definite order within the natural world. PerhapsDarwin' s desire to give up his study of evolution□to abdicate his powers, like Prospero□is not as much a reaction to social turmoil and controversial science as it is a need for a more simplified life as it draws to a close.

Critical Overview

Negative criticism is not usually hard to find on any widely published writer, but Schnackenberg is an exception. From the publication *of Portraits and Elegies* in 1982 to the release of *Supernatural Love: Poems, 1978-1992,* she has been highly praised by critics and fellow poets alike. Nearly all reviewers touch on her ability to write formal poetry without falling into a trite singsong style that turns off serious, contemporary readers. Writing for the *Nation,* critic Rosetta Cohen claims that *Portraits and Elegies* shows Schnackenberg "to be a poet of enormous control, capable of working small miracles with cadence and rhyme." In the*New Republic,* critic Rosanna Warren states that the poet's "youthful work showed formal mastery verging on the ingenious." The consistent accolades are based largely on Schnackenberg's unemotional treatment of very emotional subjects. Whether she is addressing the death of her beloved father or composing a love poem, she keeps the temperament in check, depending more on stimulating a reader's intellect than on making anyone cry or scoff.

Whereas many poets have rough beginnings and must work their way into favor with publishers, readers, and fellow poets, others start out with a bang only to fizzle into oblivion with their greatest efforts sitting on the shelves of bargain basement book stores. Neither is the case with Schnackenberg. In his article for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* critic Robert McPhillips says of the poet that "hers was one of the most notable and enthusiastically received debuts by a young American poet in the 1980s." And, remarkably, she has not fizzled over the last two decades. Critics are just as enthusiastic over and welcoming of her recent work as they were in the beginning. If there are detractors of Schnackenberg's work out there, they must be small in number and unusually quiet.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a collection of poetry, has published widely in poetry journals, and is an associate editor for a university communications department. In the following essay, she contends that the point of Schnackenberg's poem is to show the controversial naturalist in a favorable, gentle light in spite of those who would condemn him as a heretic.

When Charles Darwin wrote his autobiography in the latter part of his life, he included a section on his religious beliefs. He considered the topic at length and in the end claimed to be agnostic, basing his decision on the idea that the true origin of life cannot ever really be known by living beings. While it is true thatDarwin did not adhere to the Bible as a document of literal history, he did express a respect for the ideals of morality and philanthropy described particularly in the New Testament. He went so far as to say that dedicating one's life to helping others is of far greater value than any other occupation, including his own. In spite of his humanitarian philosophy and willingness to consider the prospect of a "personal" God, however,Darwin was harshly criticized by many and condemned outright by others for being an atheistic sinner bent on destroying Christianity worldwide.

What possible difference can a poem make in alleviating, if not reversing, the hateful, accusatory feelings that some fundamental Christians hold toward the man who made the theory of natural selection so popular? Perhaps more than one might think, if the work is read carefully with attention to the gentleness and kindness the title character seems to exude every step of the way. The reader should note, too, his apparent defenselessness, not only against the chronic illness that plagues him throughout but also against his own memories of the controversy and pain his book created among family, friends, and enemies alike. Here,Darwin is almost pitiable. Instead of provoking a reader's anger with evolution imagery, this poem tends to soften the animosity by portraying a man whose own nature—his own life—will soon "grow small, fade, disappear."

The description ofDarwin suddenly sitting up in bed, sick to his stomach and feeling dizzy, must evoke heartfelt sympathy. He is utterly alone with his pain although his wife sleeps nearby, and he will spend the rest of the night alone, wandering through his gardens, reflecting on the past. And what a past it has been for the old naturalist. The years he was fortunate enough to spend at home working on his theories and raising a large family were counteracted by a tumultuous public life, sometimes rewarding him with support and admiration and sometimes blasting him with accusations of heresy. Although his personal opinions and attitude toward a supreme being were far more complex than many people gave him credit for, he now seems to weary of his own occupation and intellectual pursuit, resigned to go to "a place where species don't exist, / Where no emergence has a counterpart."Darwin appears weakened by these thoughts and takes comfort in avoiding public appearances in favor of private evenings at home with his wife. Here,Darwin's inclination is anything but blasphemous, his behavior anything but controversial.

The gentleness ofDarwin's character is continued in his thoughts of the children. The scene in which "he leans against the fence" and "deeply draws" on a cigarette is very vivid in portraying both his sensitivity and his melancholy. He fondly recalls his son Frank playing a musical instrument to see if a plant in the greenhouse would respond to the sound. But this happy memory is juxtaposed against the mixed feelings he now has in regard to the science that has been an obsession for most of his life.Darwin realizes that he is "done" with everything he has experienced in his career, but he is not ready just yet to lie down and die. Instead, he wants to write his memoirs and include all those things in his life that brought him joy, from boyhood memories of a "bossy sister" and neglected school work to a grown man living a fairy tale life. The image ofDarwin as an old man putting onto paper these pleasant recollections is quite different from the image of him documenting results of experiments and recording his proposal for a theory of natural selection. In this poem, he appears very grandfatherly, just a kind, elderly "pop" who gets a kick out of relating those "when I was a boy" stories that grandkids love to hear. He is both loving and fragile, a combination that usually evokes a sympathetic smile, not disdain.

Schnackenberg chose the language of this poem carefully to imply a docile, almost helpless quality in her subject, all in direct opposition to the way his critics may characterize him. Just the verbs tell a story aboutDarwin's capabilities: he wavers, putters, leans, climbs stairs holding onto the banister, lies down, shuts a door softly, and shuts his eyes. The words supplying a blow-by-blow account of his sleepless night are also designed to make the reader sympathetic. Consider these descriptions: "He sits up in the dark"; "His seasickness upwells"; "His voyage .. . / Comes ... to a close"; his home is full of "shipsunk emptiness"; he is "an island as he walks"; "All he can see / is how [nature] will grow small, fade, disappear"; he is a naturalist "left behind" by nature; and he likens himself to an actor who has "lost his taste for verse." It is a rather forlorn sight to picture him leaning against a fence, dizzy, trying to smoke a cigarette perhaps to calm his nerves. And it is just as pitiful to see him wander back to the house where once again he must lean against a support before making his way up the steps to his bedroom. In this year before his death,Darwin is a physically weak man, and his previous strong convictions have worn thin as well. The "scientific prose," which he once wrote so pro-lifically and diligently, is now a "raging hell / Of tortured grammars writhing on their stakes." In essence, he is tired of the fight□tired of the controversy and tired of defending his beliefs to people who do not really understand the ideas he has put forth for examination.

Another point that cannot be overlooked is the poet's comparison ofDarwin to Shakespeare's Prospero. Obviously, there are scores of characters to choose from when a writer wants to make allusions to the playwright's works, and Schnacken-berg's selection of the Duke of Milan is right in keeping with her desired portrayal of the naturalist. Both Darwin and Prospero are loving fathers, and both exhibit a willingness to put family first. Both men are intellectuals, but neither is arrogant about it, and both men make decisions toward the end of their lives that are major changes for them□ Prospero gives up his magic and returns home to be a "normal" duke, and Darwin gives up his science to write his memoirs and spend quiet days with his wife. Probably the most conspicuous reason that Schnackenberg chose to allude to *The Tempest* and its main

character is that Prospero is a man of extremely good will and one who is capable of weathering the worst that life has to offer while maintaining a humanitarian attitude. Even though his own brother stole his kingdom and left him to die along with his three-year-old daughter, Prospero ends up forgiving the "bad" brother, and the brother, in turn, becomes a good human being. The happy ending does not come without its price, but Prospero believes the right choice is to return home with his family, and he abides by his conscience. While the events in the lives of Darwin and Prospero may not be parallel on every count, the point of the comparison is obvious. In spite of the duke's magical abilities to stir up storms and bring conflict and unrest to the world around him, he is by no means an evil sorcerer. In spite of the viewpoint of some fundamental Christians, the same may be said ofDarwin.

"Darwin in 1881" ends on an even more mournful note than the rest of the poem expresses. The allusions are no longer to a Shakespearean character but toDarwin's own past scientific pursuits. In giving up his geological and zoological studies, he becomes more a part of them than ever. It is as though his relinquishment of the fossil records has drawn him deeper into them until he himself becomes "a fabulous-headed / Fossil" lying down in a riverbed that will vanish over time. And once again he is alone. Although Emma still sleeps beside him in their bed, Darwin is set apart from her, not only because of the barrier his boots and overcoat present but also because he has spent the night deep in thoughts that are highly personal and difficult to convey. He knows he is an old man nearing the end of his life and is content to close his eyes for now and, soon perhaps, forever. This is hardly a portrayal of religion's "biggest bogeyman," and the poet makes that case with authority.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Darwin in 1881," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles about twentieth-century literature. In this essay, he explores the significance of the many parallels in the poem betweenDarwin and Shakespeare's character Prospero.

Schnackenberg's "Darwin in 1881" interweaves past and present not only in the personal life of Charles Darwin but also in the evolution of the natural world thatDarwin documented so exhaustively. The mood of the poem is somber, conveying the sense of a long and busy life drawing to a close. The naturalist does not look back on his life of scientific discovery with any sense of accomplishment. In spite of his vast knowledge, all he is now aware of from his many years of study is that everything in nature "will grow small, fade, disappear." TheDarwin of the poem is aware only of absences, of vanishings, of things in nature that formerly were and are no more. This is of course an allusion to the extinction of species over the long course of evolution, in which the process of "natural selection" ensures that the life forms that survive are those that adapt best to their environment.Darwin also described this process as the "survival of the fittest." In this poem, however,Darwin links natural selection to a more general notion of death, which not only lays waste to thousands of entire species but comes inevitably to all creatures, himself included. He is acutely aware of his own impending death, "Bound for a place where species don't exist."

The poet adds a level of complexity to the poem when she equatesDarwin with Prospero, the magician of Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest.* The references to Prospero pervade the poem, making it more than just a meditation on death. It also touches on issues such as the nature of knowledge, reality, dream, and illusion.

Prospero and Darwin were both men of knowledge and learning, but they represented different sides of the same coin.Darwin was a scientist. He measured, observed, and analyzed the natural world in order to determine its fixed laws of change and development. His methods were objective. Prospero, on the other hand, developed the inner rather than the outer aspects of knowledge. He became a master of the subjective world of the mind, and this gave him power over the outer world. By the power of his imagination, he could summon up events and phenomena in nature, such as the storm that produces the shipwreck that sets *The Tempest* in motion. (As a fictional character, Prospero is also, of course, the product of the imagination of his creator, Shakespeare.) Taken together, Darwin and Prospero, as was once said of the Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato, divide the empire of the human mind.

But in the poem it seems that neither the subjective nor the objective approach to truth yields any substantial knowledge that might ward off the final reality of death and extinction. Prospero, for all his magical powers, is eventually just as bereft asDarwin. In a creative twist of her own, the poet imagines a life for Prospero beyond even the one with which Shakespeare endowed him. She pictures him, having returned from his island exile to reclaim his dukedom of Milan, as being as sleepless asDarwin. All his previous wisdom, including the magical powers that he renounced, now means nothing

to him or anyone else. The seemingly miraculous acts he performed have been reduced to mere sailors' yarns, fabulous events that may never have actually occurred in real life. LikeDarwin, Prospero's life's work has ended at the borders of a death that is the final outcome of everything. Prospero's famous speech in *The Tempest,* to which the poet alludes, is at one level of meaning a foreshadowing of this. In that speech Prospero announces that the world and everything in it is nothing more than an "insubstantial pageant" and will fade into nothingness. So too will all human life, the objective reality of which Prospero also calls into question: "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on; and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep."

This allusion leads Schnackenberg to her gnomic phrase, "Knowledge increases unreality," which epitomizes the theme of the poem. It suggests, first, that the more humans know, the more they are aware of how much they do not know (as Socrates is said to have remarked). Second, it means that all knowledge leads to the perception of the essential unreality of things, in the sense that everything is impermanent. Given nature's vast vanishings□the extinction of species over time□ the natural world can be seen as a long, slow disappearing act (the theatrical metaphor is Prospero's and is also used by theDarwin of the poem).

It is the sense of the transience of all things that is responsible for the melancholy mood that permeates the poem. Transience is also conveyed by the pervasive sea imagery. The restless sea, always in motion, never fixed, has been used as a symbol of impermanence by poets and philosophers from ancient times to the present. In "Darwin in 1881," the sea imagery is in part prompted by *The Tempest,* which is replete with such imagery. It is also a reference to Darwin's voyage on *H. M. S. Beagle* to theGalapagos Islands, where he conducted the research that he published twenty years later in *The Origin of Species.* These sources combine to produce Schnackenberg's picture ofDarwin as a lonely voyager on the inconstant sea of life, which at the last has given him no firm moorings, only a coastline fading from view and "an ocean swell of sickness."

What Schnackenberg omits in her Darwin/ Prospero portrait is that Prospero does much more than give a speech about the inconstancy of things and renounce his magical powers. By cultivating the resources of his own mind, Prospero□whose name is derived from "prosper" or "prosperity"□develops the ability to shape the outer manifestations of life according to his own needs and desires. It is Prospero who creates the storm that leads his shipwrecked enemies to the island where he lives in exile. It is Prospero who conjures up various apparitions that confront the malefactors with the consequences of their own deeds. In doing so, Prospero works with providence (the benevolent guidance of God) to produce justice tempered with mercy. All things may indeed be transient, but that does not mean that humans have no control over events or that those events are purposeless. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is as much about destiny, divine providence, and freedom as it is about the impermanence of all things. Schnackenberg chooses to create what might be called an extra-Shakespearean, post-play Prospero who wanted to discontinue his "gigantic works," apparently for the purpose of ego-gratification, so that he could later tell stories of his exploits, "where he could be the man / In Once upon a time there was a man." This gives Prospero's actions in the play a kind of fairytale

quality, with little implication for the real world. Of course, the poet is entitled to interpret and recreate the figure of Prospero however she wishes, and Schnackenberg chooses not to explore the more tantalizing aspects of Shakespeare's play: the breaking down of the distinction between reality and illusion, truth and appearance. Instead, this issue is presented in a more straightforward manner. The one character in the poem who is content isDarwin's wife, Emma. But her contentment is only because she is dreaming, "moored in illusion," where everything is clear; death and extinction are cheated by "island beings," who become magical shape-shifters, adept at avoiding their own fate in real life. There is an echo here of Prospero's magical island, in which strange transformations and happenings are the rule and have beneficent consequences in the real world of the play. But in "Darwin in 1881," such events are anchored firmly in the world of illusion.

The result is that the restless Darwin of Schnackenberg's poem is, in a sense, a victim of the success of his own theory. Natural selection dealt a severe blow to Protestant Natural Theology, according to which all species were specially designed and created by God and fixed in a permanent form. Every creature was perfectly suited to the environment in which it was placed, and a beneficent God upheld the unchangeable order of creation. Darwin's theory not only demolished that static view of creation, it also called into question the Natural Theologians' belief that man, as a spiritual and moral being, had a special place in creation. For the historical Darwin, man was not unique or special; he belonged to the nature from which he emerged□a belief that is nicely conveyed in the poem asDarwin lies down "like a fabulous-headed / Fossil in a vanished riverbed."

In its belief in providential design, Natural Theology was in a sense closer to the heart of Prospero's universe in *The Tempest* than to the ruthless world revealed by the theory of natural selection. The demise of Natural Theology made it more difficult for people to believe in the traditional Christian doctrine of an afterlife in heaven for the virtuous, a thought that does not even cross the mind of theDarwin of the poem. The only heaven is for dreamers; the only eternal life creatures can hope for is to be fossilized in riverbeds or "canyon floors, in silt, / In lime, in deepening blue ice, / In cliffs." All Prospero's wizardry cannot help when the final moment comes.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "Darwin in 1881," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Taibl has published widely in the field of twentieth-century poetry. In the following essay, she explores Schnackenberg's poem and how it presents the relationship of historic and literary eras.

"Darwin in 1881" is a poem about the relationship of the present to the past. In the work, Gjertrud Schnackenberg explores the complexity of historical and artistic relationships as new ideas and standards replace old ones. In the poem, the reader meets the geologist Darwin a year before his death□after his theories are published, after his career has come and gone, and at a turning point in the middle-aged man's life. Schnackenberg draws parallels betweenDarwin's life and the life of the artist-king, Prospero, from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest.* As she strings together historic and literary times and the people that draw histories together, she explores the debt of modern poetry to the forms and traditions of a literary past.

Schnackenberg plays with form in the poem in a way that calls to mind the balance of the in-between times of history. Ultimately, she reveals a return to traditional poetic form that is engaged in a modern context. In the meeting of tradition and modernity, a hybrid form is created. The hybrid is a new self for the contemporary poet, a marriage of past and present, a joining that is carefully illustrated through the character ofDarwin as he reinvents himself in the context of history and his own theories.

In the opening lines of "Darwin in 1881," Schnackenberg employs an allusion, or literary reference, to Shakespeare's play *The Tempest.* Darwin is compared to Shakespeare's Prospero, the creator king. LikeDarwin in this poem, Prospero discovers in *The Tempest* that "His voyage around the cape of middle age / Comes, with a feat of insight, to a close." What is the insight? "Knowledge increases unreality." This is a cryptic revelation and only the beginning of the confusion the reader feels as the logic in the poem travels back and forth between the scientific lucidity of being "done with beetle jaws and beaks of gulls" to the less clear but more profound universe, which is compared to a "disregarded game of chess." Each stable image in the poem gives way to an uncertain wave drawing parallels betweenDarwin's journey in the poem and Prospero's in *The Tempest* as a cycle of self revolution that is at once quite clear and terribly confusing. The world is at once an unreal place of floating islands and the concrete place one returns to "for backgammon with your beloved mate."

AsDarwin is compared to Prospero, he is also compared to Prospero's creator, Shakespeare.Darwin's geological revelations are similar to Shakespeare's literary miracles, and both, within the context of the poem, have been reduced to sailors' tales. *The Tempest* is the ultimate sailor's tale of sweeping vistas, shipwrecks, and hints of brutishness. Darwin's sailor tale took place on the *H. M. S. Beagle* as he chronicled the geological wonders of Patagonia andTierra del Fuego. The results of this trip would be the body ofDarwin's life work, *On The Origin of Species.* When the reader meetsDarwin in the poem, these geological adventures are over, just as Prospero's life on the island in *The Tempest* is over. In this space of time, as era concedes to era, just before the

"thunderclap / Required in Act 3," or the end of one story as another prepares in the wings, life truly takes form. Or does it? The poem suggests that at the point in life when the long-sought knowledge is at its most rich, the unreality of all of life is revealed. Should it not be the other way around? Should not the world make more sense to an individual, to an era of thinkers, after all the books have been published and theories proven? The poem, indeed, is quite wise, suggesting that the very knowledge we seek and obtain throughout our lives only increases the mystery.

The geology of the poem is the concern of the poet. This concern appears in the poem asDarwin's "form," his shadow, "wavers on the stair." The traditional verse form, for which Schnackenberg is known, wavers in the poem. Rhyme occurs throughout the lines, but without consistency. This wavering of form mirrorsDarwin's mental instabilities. Darwin, the master of geological insight, wavers between strata of history. He sees "The family portraits stare, / All haunted by each other's likenesses." These faces are the figures of history imposed on his story. The poet shows the reader historic figures, real and fictional, struggling to define their own historical territory, who end up staring each other in the face. This is Schnackenberg's struggle as well: to define a new poetic voice that is poised between and haunted by traditional verse forms and modernist ideals.

In a very skilled way, Schnackenberg portrays the identity crisis of poetic form with that ofDarwin' s struggle in history.Darwin's scientific language and the poem's language are compared to "tortured grammar's writhing on their stakes." The struggle is Schnackenberg's, too. As a poet, Schnackenberg is considered a new formalist, the title sprung from the 1980s' movement that defied the political statements of modern open forms and challenged the contemporary reader and writer to explore the complexities of their subject matter within the *freedom* of form. Literary eras are defined by movements. Modernism is a term, as well as a movement, which is identified with concepts, sensibility, form, and style in literature and art since the First World War. Most critics agree that modernism involves a deliberate and radical break with the traditional bases of both Western culture and Western art. Modernism ultimately birthed free verse in poetry. Free verse, or open form, became a very important movement, which is still very popular today. Open forms began as Robert McPhillips suggests in his article "Reading the New Formalists," as a way to assert personal identities against a discredited version of an 'elitist' past," which suggests that open forms were a way to make a political statement, a way to express a unique and personal voice in a traditional literary society and canon. For a poet like Schnackenberg, the ideals of modernism are in themselves restrictive. In the push toward "freedom," Schnackenberg joined a group of poets issuing a challenge to return to form with the attitude of revealing something new. But neither is Schnackenberg a traditionalist. As "Darwin in 1881" shows, she is able to employ tools both of the free verse and formalist schools to emphasize the dynamics of language struggle and evolution. Critic Pheobe Pettingell in a review of *The Lamplit Answer,* the collection that contains "Darwin in 1881," writes that Schnackenberg, "recognizes a universe of ideas outside her own personal impressions and treats form as an enhancement and delight, rather than a trap." As a new formalist, Schnackenberg uses form as a way of making sense of chaos. Rosanna Warren writing in the*New Republic* said that Schnackenberg's work may be compared "to the art of tapestry. Whether woven or stitched, tapestry suggests a work whose complexity and tensile

strength subordinate many disparate elements to one masterful order." This is the same tapestry thread that ties "Darwin in 1881" to Shakespeare in 1611 and the readers' eyes and ears in this year.

AsDarwin's world is compared to the world of *The Tempest,* the poem is tied to an idealized world of imagination, a place of magical rejuvenation.Darwin is compared to the ruler of this imaginary land, who creates an illusion of loss to test his enemies and make them reveal their true selves. In many ways,Darwin's losses, his realizations, help him discover himself in the context of history. Darwin, the scientist, looks at the eggs of birds and knows that within them are "unique expressions," those chromosomes that will define a different future for the species, a future written on "inner staircases," codes to survive in future generations. At the same time, he knows that some, unneeded traits will fall away with time. This idea is his theory of natural selection. The falling away of traits is the loss that prompts him to be "done with beetle jaws and beak of gulls / And bivalve hinges, now, utterly done." For him, "One miracle remains, and only one." The miracle is that all his "knowledge increases unreality." The scientist sees and understands facts.Darwin built his life upon observation and hypothesis, and still, even with this knowledge, the universe becomes a "disregarded game of chess." The people, the animals, the very things that have been concrete to him, become pawns. Mystery is the only future certainty. One trait may be all that remains. But, which one? How will the world recreate itself for survival? These questions float in the poem, as do similar questions regarding poetic form.

Schnackenberg, likeDarwin, is concerned with the "coastlines fading" or, in the poet's case, with the poetic lines moving away from form as they engage formlessness. Schnackenberg's worry is the poem as nature where the naturalist (the poet) has been left behind to work where "species don't exist, / where no emergence has a counterpart." She suggests that the chaos and freedom of nature cannot be articulated within freedom but must be brought to illumination within its counterpart□ form. It is through death that new form takes shape. Traits, physical and poetic, fall away. New traits appear, which are counterparts. These traits define new forms. These new forms ensure future survival. The poem takes shape and reshapes itself again and again throughout literary movements and stages of history, just as the egg defines new futures with each "unique expression." Poetic forms that "fell away" with modernism are back to remind readers about what was left behind in the open forms: rhythm and a clarity of cadence. The poem struggles with these things, too, as it works to define itself in a hybrid form.

The ending of this poem is not a stable ending. DoesDarwin lie down to die? The answer that history suggests is that the future holds more of him, that in death newness is revealed. That is the trust the reader must create with the poem. There will be another scientist, another great thinker that looks into family portraits and realizes a debt to the past. And that person will begin a new revolution. The same is true of the poem. New formalism will fall away and be replaced by other movements. Yet history proves that there is always a returning. With fresh eyes, the future beholds the past and recreates it. The reader cannot assume a time when the sway will cease, the revolution quiet. One of the most famous lines from *The Tempest* occurs near the end when Prospero's

daughter, Miranda, declares confidence in "a brave new world." This is the world of new languages and forms, new ideas and radical concepts. Prospero tells Miranda, who represents the up-and-coming revolutionary, that the brave new world "is only new to thee." There are faces wavering in the portrait. There is history to which the present owes a debt. This marriage of past with present is the brave new world. Paul Lake, articulates what this means for poetry in his essay, "Return to Metaphor: From Deep Imagist to New Formalist," saying "Form□by which I mean the architecture of meter and rhyme and stanza□is one more piece of string for catching resemblances." The new formalists explore resemblances between past and present, the family faces of tradition and modern times. The new formalists capture this resemblance with distinct voices, and in it they find illuminations, the brave new world. Knowledge does increase unreality, and it becomes the poet's job to articulate it. What the poet creates in the resemblances, in the making sense, is fodder for "a brave new world," in which no idea is forgotten but appears again in a new form as "island beings leap from shape to shape." The poet, then, is not unlike Darwin, who goes to sleep in his coat and boots as if, in the limbo of sleep, he may be off to discover a new species.

Source: Erika Taibl, Critical Essay on "Darwin in 1881," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #4

In the following review excerpt, St. John calls Portraits and Elegies *"an exceptional first book of poems," and "Darwin in 1881" "an affectionate portrait."*

There is once again a taste for traditional forms manifesting itself in American poetry. This is good news in that it allows the reevaluation and a new appreciation, by a whole generation of younger poets, of those traditional forms and of some of our formal masters, poets like Anthony Hecht, Richard Wilbur, Donald Justice, Howard Moss, James Merrill, and W. D. Snodgrass. It is bad news because, perhaps predictably, it is helping to usher in a whole new era of decorative parlor poetry and exceedingly vapid verse. In our hunger for the least trace of formal consciousness (as teachers, poets, and reviewers), we've been too eager to leap upon the slightest trace of formal competence as the evidence of genius. As a result, we're finding too many young poets beginning to write, in my view, the same accomplished and inconsequential verse (not poetry) that finally convinced us it was time to leave the 1950s (of poetry) in the first place. While it may be true that style and content are inseparable, it is not true that technique□formal or otherwise□makes up for lack of content, or that technique itself is style. If American poetry is going to backpedal, I wish it would do it with some grace, and perhaps some substance too, though I realize I may be pushing my expectations in this regard. It should also be said that it was the popularity and fine poetry of three non-American poets, Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Walcott, that helped initiate the present return to a concern for traditional meters and forms.

Therefore it is a special pleasure and relief to find a young poet writing in traditional forms who also has in her grasp both powerful subject matter and the intelligence to command her technique. Gjertrud Schnackenberg's *Portraits and Elegies* (David R. Godine) is an exceptional first book of poems. *Portraits and Elegies* is a book of three poems, two of which are long sequences: "Laughing with One Eye," an elegy for the poet's father, and "19 Hadley Street," a wonderful narrative poem about a house and the lives it sheltered. The book's centerpiece is an affectionate portrait of "Darwin in 1881" (a year before his death). This charming poem followsDarwin as, sleepless, he rises for a night walk; reflectively, he and the poem look back over the events of his life, of both the recent and distant past. Coming back to bed, where his wife is sleeping:

He lies down on the quilt,

He lies down like a fabulous-headed

Fossil in a vanished riverbed,

In ocean-drifts, in canyon floors, in silt,

In lime, in deepening blue ice,

In cliffs obscured as clouds gather and float;

He lies down in his boots and overcoat,

And shuts his eyes.

Source: David St. John, "Raised Voices in the Choir: A Review of 1982 Poetry Selections," in*Antioch Review,* Vol. 41, No. 2, Spring 1983, pp. 239-40.

Adaptations

There are many versions of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* on VCR tapes.Readings are also available on cassette, but with its superabundance of visual effects, hearing the play cannot really compare to seeing it.

Topics for Further Study

Read samples of both formal poetry and free verse, then write an essay explaining why you enjoy one style more than the other. Give examples of poets from each field to back up the reasons for your preference.

Try writing a poem in the style of new formalism. Then write a brief summary of how you approached the work, explaining why it was either harder or easier than you thought it would be.

Playwrights Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee's 1955 drama *Inherit the Wind* is based on the Scopes Trial regarding teaching evolution in schools. Read the play and then read accounts of the actual trial. How do the two "histories" differ? How are they similar, and what aspects may haveLawrence and Lee included for dramatic effect?

SinceDarwin first suggested his theory of natural selection in the 1850s, much public debate and even violent arguments have occurred in regard to evolution versus creation. But some people claim to have no problem accepting both. Explain how evolution and creation may be compatible theories instead of opposites.

What Do I Read Next?

Published in 2000, Dr. Jonathan Wells's book *Icons of Evolution* gives examples of what he calls falsehoods, mythology, and hoaxes that pass for evidence of Darwinian evolution. Wells is a biologist and senior fellow of the Discovery Institute's Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture. He presents an intriguing look at how strong devotion to Darwinism has led to biology textbooks containing misinformation.

Charles Darwin: Interviews and Recollections, edited by Harold Orel and published in 2000, contains over twenty excerpts from longer works by and aboutDarwin. The writings cover his family background, his voyage on the *Beagle* and his relationship with its captain, and his final years working at his home in Downe.

A loving father-daughter relationship is a driving force behind much of Schnackenberg's poetry. And so it is for sportswriter Geoffrey Norman, who decided to celebrate his fiftieth birthday by climbingGrand Teton Mountain only to find out that his fifteen-year-old daughter wanted to join him. *Two for the Summit: My Daughter, the Mountains, and Me,* published in 2000, is not just an adventure story about mountain climbing but also a memoir of a good father finding an even deeper bond with his daughter.

The so-called Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925 is reexamined in Edward J. Larson's *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial andAmerica's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion.* Published in 1997, this book provides new insight into the court battle between prosecutor William Jennings Bryant and defense lawyer Clarence Darrow when a Tennessee high school teacher, John Scopes, was arrested for teaching evolution in the classroom.

Further Study

Feirstein,Frederick, ed., *Expansive Poetry: Essays on the New Narrative and the New Formalism,* Story Line Press, 1989.

Published at the tail end of the decade in which the new formalism movement began, this collection of essays helps explain the reasons that some poets turned to a formal style of writing, using rhyme, meter, and a narrative voice. This is interesting reading for the serious student of poetry.

Golding, William, and Harold Bloom, eds., *William Shakespeare's "The Tempest,"* Modern Critical Interpretations, Chelsea House Publications, 2000.

This is, of course, only one of the many publications of Shakespeare's last play. Like most, this version contains an insightful introduction to the tragicomedy and helpful interpretations throughout.

Jarman, Mark, and David Mason, eds., *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism,* Story Line Press, 1996. As the title suggests, this anthology celebrates new formalism as a welcome and unexpected change in American poetry in the late twentieth century. Although Schnackenberg is not included, the book offers a good mix of new formalist poets, including Dana Gioia, Marilyn Hacker, and Timothy Steele.

Schnackenberg, Gjertrud, *A Gilded Lapse of Time,* Farrar Straus, 1992.

This is Schnackenberg's third poetry collection, and it continues the theme of history through an exploration of human creation versus God's creation and the impact of myth on actual events. Written in the same style as *Portraits and Elegies,* the book will not disappoint any reader who is a Schnackenberg fan.

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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 memberseducational 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.

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

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

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