Dream Variations Study Guide

Dream Variations by Langston Hughes

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Dream Variations" combines two distinct motifs that were evident in Langston Hughes's poetry throughout his lifetime. It is written in a structure that copies the repetitions of American blues music, and it is aimed, as many of his works were, primarily at children. Published first in 1932, in the collection *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, "Dream Variations" imitates the overall structure of blues music: the first, second, and fourth lines of each stanza parallel each other in that they each have four syllables, while the third is extended, longer, building to an emotional climax. Hughes was a major figure in the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic movement of the 1920s and 1930s, which brought the New York African-American arts community into prominence. He used the blues structure because it was familiar to blacks who found no point of reference in standard literary modes. Using a blues style also helped Hughes swiftly and efficiently convey the mixed emotions of hope and fear that the poem brings together. Analyzing blues music in a book previous to *The Dream Keeper*, he observed, "The mood of the *Blues* is almost always despondency, but when they are sung, people laugh." This poem takes whatever the mental process is that makes people react to bleakness with laughter, and nudges it upward toward positive action.

Hughes was a writer committed to his people, American Negroes, who suffered under segregation and discriminatory laws. His concern for justice drove him to write in a number of literary genres, including poetry, short stories, novels, plays, and essays. His poems for children stress the potential in life, encourage them to look for the good things that life has to offer, and to actively seek happiness. He was one of the few poets to state such simple ideas in the elementary language that his intended audience would understand, raising undereducated readers up to noble thoughts instead of talking down to them.

Author Biography

Hughes was born James Langston Hughes in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, to James Nathaniel and Carrie Mercer Langston Hughes, who separated shortly after their son's birth. Hughes's mother had attended college, while his father, who wanted to become a lawyer, took correspondence courses in law. Denied a chance to take the Oklahoma bar exam, Hughes' father went first to Missouri and then, still unable to become a lawyer, left his wife and son to move first to Cuba and then to Mexico. In Mexico, he became a wealthy landowner and lawyer. Because of financial difficulties, Hughes's mother moved frequently in search of steady work, often leaving him with her parents. His grandmother Mary Leary Langston was the first black woman to attend Oberlin College. She inspired the boy to read books and value an education. When his grandmother died in 1910, Hughes lived with family friends and various relatives in Kansas. In 1915 he joined his mother and new stepfather in Lincoln, Illinois, where he attended grammar school. The following year, the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio. There he attended Central High School, excelling in both academics and sports. Hughes also wrote poetry and short fiction for the *Belfry Owl*, the high school literary magazine, and edited the school yearbook. In 1920 Hughes left to visit his father in Mexico, staying in that country for a year. Returning home in 1921, he attended Columbia University for a year before dropping out. For a time he worked as a cabin boy on a merchant ship, visited Africa, and wrote poems for a number of American magazines. In 1923 and 1924 Hughes lived in Paris. He returned to the United States in 1925 and resettled with his mother and half-brother in Washington, D.C. He continued writing poetry while working menial jobs. In May and August of 1925 Hughes's verse earned him literary prizes from both *Opportunity* and *Crisis* magazines. In December of that year Hughes, then a busboy at a Washington, D.C. hotel, attracted the attention of poet Vachel Lindsay by placing three of his poems on Lindsay's dinner table. Later that evening Lindsay read Hughes's poems to an audience and announced his discovery of a "Negro busboy poet." The next day reporters and photographers eagerly greeted Hughes at work to hear more of his compositions. He published his first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, in 1926. Around this time Hughes became active in the Harlem Renaissance, a flowering of creativity among a group of African-American artists and writers. Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and other writers founded *Fire!*, a literary journal devoted to African- American culture. The venture was unsuccessful, however, and ironically a fire eventually destroyed the editorial offices. In 1932 Hughes traveled with other black writers to the Soviet Union on an illfated film project. His infatuation with Soviet Communism and Joseph Stalin led Hughes to write on politics throughout the 1930s. He also became involved in drama, founding several theaters. In 1938 he founded the Suitcase Theater in Harlem, in 1939 the Negro Art Theater in Los Angeles, and in 1941 the Skyloft Players in Chicago. In 1943 Hughes received an honorary Doctor of Letters from Lincoln University, and in 1946 he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He continued to write poetry throughout the rest of his life, and by the 1960s he was known as the "Dean of Negro Writers." Hughes died of congestive heart failure in New York City, New York, on May 22, 1967.

Poem Text

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night comes on gently,
Dark like me-
That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun,
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
Till the quick day is done.
Rest at pale evening . . .
A tall, slim tree . . .
Night coming tenderly
Black like me.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

In line 1, Hughes uses the word "fast," not only because it means the same thing in this context as "close" or "tight" would, but also because the reader cannot help but think of hurrying, and this adds a sense of urgency to the poem at its very start. The question of how to hold a dream, which is not as obvious as it might first seem to the casual reader, is central to this piece. Throughout the poem, Hughes's language treats dreams as if they were physical objects.

Lines 3-4

In line 3 the poem metaphorically identifies life with a bird. Hughes is very specific about why this bird could not fly. In using "broken-winged" instead of "crippled," he implies that some violence has occurred to the bird, and therefore to the dreamless life. Birds are commonly associated with dreams and ideals in literature because their flight in the empty sky matches the idea of uninhibited freedom, like the mind's freedom.

Lines 5-6

The first two lines are nearly repeated in lines 5-6, resembling the repetition in blues music, which this poem is based upon. Traditionally, blues lyrics describe hardship and suffering, which this poem does also. The poem, though, twice mentions holding fast to dreams, emphasizing that hardship and suffering are not inevitable. Line 6 changes the word "die" to "go": not only does this start a new rhyme, but it also adds to the sense of how vulnerable dreams are, and how easy it is to lose them.

Lines 7-8

Since blues music is traditionally from the southern part of the United States, which is warm and was mostly farm land at the time Hughes was writing, the idea of the "barren field" is an expected metaphor. The description "frozen with snow," however, is pointedly strange and hostile. There is a common association between barrenness, sterility (in the sense of sustaining no life), and being frozen. The picture Hughes gives of life in these lines is bleak, but even worse than doomed: he says that life can be hopeless if you allow it to be.

Line 9

This line states explicitly that these images and actions constitute the speaker's dream. The exclamation mark demonstrates the speaker's certainty and elation about his dream.

Lines 10-11

These lines introduce the second stanza's repetition and variation of the first stanza. Line 11 is a metaphor that personifies the sun, giving it a human "face." Line 11 also rhymes "face" with the "place" in line 2, but changes the line's meaning. Now that the first stanza has established the speaker's association of the sun with whiteness, "in the face of the sun" takes on two meanings. Not only would the speaker like to fling his arms freely in daylight, but he wishes that gesture to signal joyous defiance to that face. What he defies is ambiguous; perhaps he defies all that the sun represents in this poem□whiteness, labor, exhaustion, or the passage of time that the sun's cycles mark. Lines 12 and 13 also support this notion of defying time.

Line 12

Again, this line repeats the words "whirl, dance, day" and "done" of lines 3 and 4, yet means something different. Whereas line 3 suggests how the speaker might dance to celebrate a sense of freedom, in line 12 the celebration seems frantic, ominous, and obligatory: "Dance!" is a command. The tone of the speaker's dance may have changed be- cause the speaker has come to recognize that each passing day marks one less day to live.

Line 13

Line 13 changes the "white day" of line 4 to "quick day." The day's "quick" passage may explain the speaker's feeling of urgency, as if there is precious little time left in which to live. He may feel that daylight time is stolen from him by the sun as it withdraws each day. Since the effects of whiteness or white culture on this speaker are probably not "quick" (unfortunately), here the sun may shift from its previous symbolic associations with whiteness to a more conventional and literal association with time's passage.

Lines 14-15

Like line 13's transformation of the "white day" to a "quick day," line 14 transforms the "cool evening" into "pale evening." On a literal level, these variations describe day and evening in ordinary terms. But on a figurative level, "day" loses some of its associations with whiteness while "evening," by becoming "pale," acquires more whiteness. The ellipses (three dots indicating an unfinished thought) at the ends of lines 14 and 15

make the lines' meanings more ambiguous. Once the evening takes on an ambiguous complexion, is it "dark" like the speaker or white like the day? The speaker's relation to the tree is similarly uncertain. He no longer rests "beneath" it. The tree simply floats beside the image of evening. Which one "rests": the evening or the tall slim tree? If the tree is resting (and "slim" usually refers to people), the speaker may be imagining himself as the tree. As a tree, he would achieve his dream of flinging his arms, or branches, wide in the sun, and he would have found a peaceful, safe, and more permanent home on Earth. Simply by using the vague punctuation of ellipses, Hughes uproots the reader's sense of where the speaker is at and what is being compared. Although the reader can assume that the speaker does not actually become a tree, the speaker's vision of transformation suggests that he achieves a momentary feeling of peace and eternity, if only in his imagination.

Line 16

As either a tree or a man, night still seems to the speaker to be tender and familiarly black. The change from "dark like me" (line 8) to "black like me" in the final line suggests a shift like that of evening to night: from an in-between stage to a complete stage, where darkness predominates over light.

Line 17

Here the speaker compares nature to himself ("like me"). Night closes the poem, forming the last image of passing time. Through this comparison and this concluding image, Hughes conveys a pride in Blackness. Hughes's poems consistently create images and arguments for black pride. In 1924, when this poem was written, the concept of black pride was radical and rarely expressed in print. Contemporary readers must consider the era and culture in which this or any poem was written in order to understand more fully the poem's impact on literary and American history.

Themes

The Spiritual Reunion with Africa

Although nowhere in "Dream Variations" does the speaker say where his dream takes place, it has been suggested by many critics that the "place of the sun" to which he refers is Africa. Langston Hughes wrote the poem in 1924, a time when the Back to Africa movement was gaining strength, when African art was being introduced to Europe and America, and when many African Americans were searching for a place and values that were distinctly their own and not part of white American culture. Hughes had traveled to West Africa in 1923, and in many of his early poems, he uses Africa to represent an ideal, a place of warmth and freedom that is a foil to the cold, uncaring atmosphere of the United States where for blacks discrimination, racism, and often brutal treatment were a feature of everyday life.

In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker describes his dream. He is in a sunny place, his arms flung wide as he whirls and dances until the end of the day. At evening, he rests beneath a tall tree. The images of the sun, dancing, and a tall tree seem to suggest an exotic, tropical paradise free of worry and where the spirit can be liberated. The second stanza presents the same images in more intense form. In both stanzas, there is a sense that the place of the dream is beautiful and primitive. If the place is Africa, it is a land of joy and freedom, and there the speaker enjoys a sense of spiritual as well as physical liberation. The references to "dark" and "black" in positive terms also seem to indicate that this is a place where blackness is celebrated, not condemned. For many African Americans, Africa was viewed as a spiritual homeland, the place of their ancestry where they could finally be themselves. In "Dream Variations," this idea of Africa as a place of freedom, unspoiled charm, and celebration is suggested by the speaker's feeling of contentment from morning till night.

While Hughes's early poems show a degree of interest in Africa as the spiritual homeland of American blacks, he wrote in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, that he rejected this idea in the 1930s. The poems that refer to Africa were written in response to a mood of the 1920s rather than from his own personal convictions. Hughes says that he

> did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro□who loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa□but I was not African.

Still, in "Dream Variations" and other poems that celebrate the ideal of an African homeland, Hughes captured an important sentiment expressed by American blacks who were searching for a spiritual home where they would be accepted and treated as equals and not judged by the color of their skin.

The Dream Motif

The dream motif is one that pervades much of Hughes's writing, and the idea of the dream is used in several ways in "Dream Variations." In one of his most famous poems, "Harlem" (1951), the author asks, "What happens to a dream deferred?" The dream of political freedom and economic well being for African Americans, he suggests, is one aspect of the "American dream," but it cannot be fulfilled because of the racism that pervades American society. In Hughes's social poetry he depicts black life and shows how African Americans' attempts to fulfill their dreams have been thwarted. The other type of dream that Hughes often refers to in his poems is the romantic dream-fantasy, where the speaker dreams of ideal love, adventure, or spiritual release. This latter type of dream is more personal than social, as the poet yearns for a state of being or mind that may not be achievable through political means but through some mental awakening or in one's fantasy. In "Dream Variations," the speaker seems to merge these two ideas of the dream. The speaker describes a dream that he is having where he is in a faraway place and things are good. It is an intensely personal, romantic dream. There are no overt references to political or social events or situations, as the speaker tells of his own dream where his soul is set free. The speaker's dream, it has been suggested, might be of Africa, a place where he can finally feel joyful and at home. However, it should be asked why the speaker is dreaming of the kind of liberation he describes. Most likely this is because his life as it is is not free. In the dream, the speaker can dance and whirl with abandon, which seems to indicate that in reality this is simply not a possibility. That is, because of the racism that is such a part of American society, he cannot be a part of the "American dream" and must hope instead for a freedom of a different kind and in a different place. Thus in his intensely personal dream-fantasy, the speaker longs for spiritual freedom because for him, as an African American, his dream of freedom is by necessity "deferred" because of the effects of racism.

It has also been suggested by one critic that because the poem has nine lines in the first stanza and only eight in the second stanza, this implies the dwindling of the dream. The speaker, it is claimed, longs for his dream and sees the externalization of it in his love for nature, the place, and the sun. But the dream exists only in the lyric moment of timelessness, and in the dynamic world of social change (seen in the second stanza), the dream decays. Another interpretation of the poem takes a quite different approach. It claims that in the first stanza, the speaker describes the dream in mental, rational, conscious terms and in the second he is actually *in* a dream state, experiencing the dream. The first stanza is descriptive, uses infinitives ("To dance," "to whirl"), and is syntactically organized. The second stanza, on the other hand, is fragmented, elliptical, and intensified, as are dreams. The poem, according to the second interpretation, can thus be seen as an exploration of different types of mental experiences, showing a movement from a rational, ego-dominated state to an irrational, innocent dreamlike state. These two states are described in the poem to show that black Africans are encumbered with two identities, a "double-consciousness," as well as to show that this dualism can be unified.

The Celebration of Blackness

"Dream Variations" is a subtle celebration of blackness as it presents darkness and night in positive terms. Again, the ideas in the poem are not stated overtly but merely suggested. The speaker is in a dreamy place of love and relaxation and he is identified with the "gentle" and "tender" night. The references to "white" and "pale" are not at all derogatory, implying that feelings of prejudice because of color are unnatural and unfounded. In the speaker's dream, white, paleness, darkness, and night are all part of the beautiful landscape. But the speaker himself identifies with night and darkness. In the place of his dream, night comes gently and tenderly; it is not to be feared but welcomed. The speaker praises night, the time of dreams, and with it, he also celebrates himself and his race.

Style

By conventional poetic standards, the structure of "Dream Variations" is simple: there are two rhyming lines (die/fly, go/snow); the first, second and fourth line of each stanza each have four syllables; there is no consistent rhythmic structure (no meter); and 26 of the 32 words are just one syllable. But, this poem does not intend to follow any poetic structure: Hughes has given it the structure of the blues, a musical form from the American South with its rhythmic roots in Africa. Blues songs deal with loss and defeat in such a way that hardship can be contained, even conquered, in the minds of the people who have suffered. It is the strict structure of the blues that helps the mind take control of the misery stated in the words. In standard blues, there is one long line, with a pause in the middle, repeated and then followed by a long unbroken third line, followed by a fourth line that resolves the problem, sometimes happily but usually stoically, accepting a bad situation. In each stanza of "Dreams," Hughes uses the long first line with the pause in the middle (represented by the line break after "dreams" in lines 1 and 5), but he does not repeat this line. There is a climax in the third line of each stanza that draws attention to itself by giving the reader the poem's vivid imagery ("broken-winged bird" and "barren field"); and a final line that could, by itself, leave the reader with a bleak view of the world if the poem did not twice offer the solution to that bleakness: "Hold fast to dreams."

Historical Context

The end of World War I in 1918 proved to be a mixed blessing for black Americans. When the 400,000 blacks who had served during the war returned home, many were dismayed to find that their service to the United States did not mean that they would finally achieve the respect and dignity necessary to participate fully in the American dream. To make matters worse, thousands of blacks who had moved from the South to work in northern factories during the labor shortages of the war years were thrown out of their jobs to make room for returning white soldiers. As racial resentment grew between the two groups, violence spread throughout the country. In the South, lynchings increased alarmingly, and in 1919, over seventy blacks were murdered by white racists who feared black advancement as an assault on southern culture. Conditions were hardly better in the North, and in July 1919, tensions came to boil in Chicago after a black youth swimming in Lake Michigan drowned after being stoned by whites who feared he was swimming too close to their exclusive beach. Chicago erupted in rioting that continued for over a week and subsided only after the deaths of 38 people. In other northern cities, similar violence erupted, leaving 120 Americans dead, the majority of whom were black.

The greatest black populist response to this racial tension and violence was organized by Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican immigrant who made New York's Harlem the international headquarters for his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Before Garvey arrived in New York in 1916, he had become convinced from his experiences in Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Europe that blacks were at the bottom of the social ladder throughout the world, that they suffered the greatest indignities, and that they usually performed the most backbreaking and menial labor. Inspired by the writings and work of Booker T. Washington, Garvey sailed to New York in 1916 intent on raising money to build a black university in Jamaica, which□like its model, the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama□would become a haven where blacks could gain the educational tools necessary for equality with whites.

As Garvey traveled throughout the United States, he quickly rose to prominence for his great skills as a public speaker and for his poignant message that blacks should not be ashamed for being black, but instead should be proud to be descendants of Africans. African civilizations, Garvey told his appreciative audiences, had reached astounding heights when European civilizations were little more than savage tribes of hunters and warriors. God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary, Garvey insisted, were black, and Negroes who worshiped a white God were doomed to perpetuate Negro inferiority. Preaching this message of black pride in speeches and through his newspaper, *Negro World*, Garvey's UNIA rapidly expanded its membership. By the time of the Chicago riots, the UNIA boasted two million members and included thirty-eight chapter organizations around the world, its leader affectionately dubbed "the Black Moses" for his work to uplift his people from oppression.

In August 1920, Garvey organized the First International Convention of the Negro People of the World in Harlem. For an entire month, black delegates from around the

globe met, delivered speeches, and called for universal black solidarity to resist racial inequalities in the United States and worldwide. These delegates drafted the *Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World*, which listed many of the injustices inflicted on blacks around the world and solutions for those problems. Before the conclusion of the convention, Garvey made explicit his own dream that one day Africa would be liberated from its white colonial masters and would once again be ruled by black leaders. This new Africa, Garvey believed, was the natural and rightful home of all the world's blacks, and they would return to their ancestral homes where they could determine their own fates unmolested by white racism and domination.

Garvey's call to make Africa a black Zion became known as the Back to Africa movement. Although few American blacks ever immigrated to Africa, Garvey sent several delegations to Liberia in 1922 and 1924 to discuss the possibility of creating settlements for the thousands of blacks Garvey anticipated would rush to create a new Africa. Liberia eventually rejected the idea of these settlements, but Garvey and his organization continued to advocate for Africans to establish their own homeland. While Hughes did not ever consider returning to Africa, "Dream Variations," written at the height of the black nationalism movement, shows the influence of the notion of Africa as the true homeland for American blacks.

By the mid 1920s, Garvey's movement was unraveling nearly as quickly as it had gained prominence. Garvey's own uncompromising personality made him many enemies, and the head of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, believed Garvey's message was dangerous and fostered racial violence. In 1923, Garvey was convicted of fraud for promoting sales of stock in his Black Star Line, a shipping company he had started four years earlier to create a black-owned industry and that would eventually assist in the back-to-Africa migration. After a year and a half of appeals, Garvey began serving his sentence in 1925. For the next two years, angry blacks led rallies, some attracting over 100,000 protesters, demanding that the government release Garvey. In 1927, President Coolidge had Garvey set free, but immigration officials immediately declared him a dangerous criminal and ordered his extradition to Jamaica. Far from the international limelight, Garvey's fame and influence faded, as did his Back to Africa movement.

Critical Overview

Hughes was a true Renaissance man, a term meaning that he was expert in many different fields, but he received his best critical response for his poetry and fiction. Sometimes, though, critics would not recognize that Hughes was writing for an undereducated audience and would accuse the writer himself of being remedial and marginally talented. Harry Allan Potamkin, for example, recognized what Hughes was trying to do□use the American folk music tradition in poetry□but he did not think it was a feat that took much skill. "Whatever value as poetry the Negro spirituals or blues may have," Potamkin wrote in the *Nation*, "duplicate spirituals or blues have only duplicate values. In the conformation of the inherent qualities of these indigenous songs to an original personal intelligence or intuition lies the poetic performance. And Mr. Hughes has not made the material so perform." In short, Potamkin believed the blues could be made into good poetry if an author put his original ideas into his work, but he did not think that Hughes added enough of himself. Famed novelist James Baldwin, reviewing *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1959, categorized the works as "poems which almost succeed but do not succeed, poems which take refuge, finally, in a fake simplicity in order to avoid the very difficult simplicity of experience."

The majority of critics, though, appreciate and approve of Hughes's attempt to bring traditional Negro art forms to literature. In the words of Theodore R. Hudson, reviewing Hughes's last book of poetry in the *CLA Journal*, "His message is both valid and valuable. Hughes depicts with fidelity the Negro's situation and the Negro's reaction to this situation. Hughes has the discerning and accurate eye so necessary for the poet, and his poet's eye and hand are synchronized." Most critics today would agree with Hudson's judgment.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kukathas is a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Kukathas maintains that because of the nature of the poem as a dream, an understanding by the reader of Hughes's background, political beliefs, and influences aids in interpretation and discovering new levels of meaning in Hughes's poem.

Upon first reading, Hughes's poem appears to be merely the recounting of a simple dream by an unnamed speaker. The action and images of the poem are so spare, at first sight seeming to reveal only that the speaker is having a dream about dancing in a "place in the sun" and then resting underneath a tree until night descends. But of course, the poem is about much more. Indeed it is striking that in seventeen uncomplicated lines Hughes is able to suggest such a wealth of ideas, touching as he does on subjects like the social reality of the 1920s, Black Americans' spiritual connection with Africa, and racial prejudice. Part of the reason he is able to call up so much in so short a space is that the subject of the poem is a dream. As with all dreams, to understand fully the significance of what is represented requires a significant amount of interpretation, imagination, and background knowledge. As anyone who has helped a person close to them decipher the meaning of a dream knows, close scrutiny of the dream's images coupled with an intimate knowledge of the dreamer can yield impressions or truths that are not at all obvious at the outset. Thus "Dream Variations," more than most poems, benefits not only from a careful probing into the action and imagery in the poem itself but also an examination of the poet/dreamer and his beliefs, social background, and main concerns. A fuller understanding of the poem comes when the reader can understand the layers of meaning that are contained within the simple descriptions presented, and these layers of meaning may be uncovered by gaining a deeper understanding of the poet and his interests and influences.

"Dream Variations" is one of Hughes's early poems, written in 1924 when he was only twentytwo. Although he had not yet established his reputation as a poet, during this time, Hughes was gaining some renown as an important new voice in African-American circles. Also, despite his young age, the poet had already lived a full life. His parents separated when he was young, and he lived with his grandmother and then his mother in Kansas and Illinois, where he felt the full effects of the racism against African Americans that was a feature of life in the United States. By 1921, Hughes had also visited his estranged father several times in Mexico, taught school there, traveled to Europe and Africa, moved to New York City, and attended Columbia University. After leaving Columbia in 1921, he began to publish in *Crisis*, the historic magazine of the N. A. A. C. P. founded by the poet W. E. B. DuBois.

In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes discusses his early years, noting his loneliness growing up; his love of books and ideas that provided an escape; the racism he encountered in school, where he and other Black children were routinely placed separately from the other pupils; being called names and hurt physically by White youngsters; being denied entrance to the movie theater because of his color; and his friendships with White students at school. He mentions that his closest friend in school

was a Polish boy who also had to put up with racial remarks from his own teacher and classmates. Growing up in poverty and a constant sense of insecurity, Hughes says in his autobiography, he "believed in books more than in people," and sought his escape from reality by reading. He also talks about his travels to Europe and Africa in 1923. His six-month voyage along the West Coast from Dakar to Luanda he describes as transforming. He says

> when I saw the dust-green hills in the sunlight, something
> took hold of me inside. My Africa, Motherland
> of the Negro peoples! And me a Negro! Africa! . . .
> it was . . . the Africa I had dreamed about□wild and
> lovely, the people dark and beautiful, the palm trees
> tall, the sun bright.

In Europe, Hughes traveled, worked as a dishwasher, and met the distinguished African- American scholar Alain Locke, who invited him to submit his poems for publication in a special issue of *Survey Graphic*. Returning to New York, Hughes met a number of distinguished literary figures, won awards for his work, but had to continue working at menial jobs in hotels and restaurants in order to be able to live.

All of Hughes's early experiences contributed profoundly to his poetry, and this is especially ap- parent in "Dream Variations," which calls up a number of the poet's early experiences in compressed form. As Hughes himself notes in *The Big Sea*, he was from a young age a dreamer, someone who sought to escape his present reality by being transported to other worlds through books. The present reality that was particularly disturbing to him was the racism that held his family in poverty. In the first stanza of "Dream Variations," the speaker describes his dream and in doing so expresses that he wants to escape his present reality by being in a far-away place. He says, "To fling my arms wide," to dance, to rest at nightfall□"that is my dream." He is not only describing the dream he has, but explains that these things happening in the dream are what he wishes for. The sun conjures up an image of warmth and well-being as well as of life. The image of arms flung wide and dancing signifies a sense of freedom, happiness, and abandon. The tree seems to symbolize a sense of rootedness. When he announces "That is my dream," the speaker makes clear that the things in his dream are what he longs for and also shows he is aware that his present reality is much different from the preferred state of things.

The poet, then, dreams of the things he did not and does not have as a child and young man growing up in the United States. He wants to be transported to a different place, where there is a sense of warmth and well-being that he did not experience as a Black American, where he feels rooted and secure, and where he can enjoy the freedom that is denied to him in his present situation. As he describes his dream, longing for a different type of life□one of happiness and freedom□Hughes calls up the social reality of the time and place he was growing up and shows its severe limitations. It is a place where he and his family struggled but could not enjoy the fruits of their labor because of the discrimination faced by every African American.

At the same time, Hughes suggests that there is a very real place where he *can* enjoy the things in his dream. The images he uses in the poem are strikingly similar to those he uses as he describes his initial impressions of Africa in *The Big Sea*. In "Dream Variations" the speaker dreams of dancing wildly in "a place in the sun" and of resting in the evening beneath a "tall tree," which in the second stanza becomes a "tall, slim tree." In his autobiography, Hughes finds Africa "wild and lovely" and comments on the brightness of the sun and the tall palm trees. He also thinks of Africa as the homeland of all people of African descent, admires the "dark and beautiful" people, and is struck by the fact that he is African like them. In "Dream Variations" the poet admires the night and is struck by the fact that he is dark and black like the night. By using certain key images, Hughes suggests in the poem a spiritual connection with Africa, the true homeland to him and other Black Americans because blackness there is celebrated and not condemned, and because in Africa happiness and freedom can be found.

But despite the fact that the poem celebrates and admires darkness and night, it shows light and dark, pale and black complementing each other and playing important roles in the speaker's dream. The speaker is dancing in the sun, during the "white day." He then rests at evening until dark night falls gently. In the second stanza, the speaker says he rests at "pale evening" before night comes tenderly. In both the stanzas, there is balance of white and black, dark and light. The white day, warmed by the sun, is a time for dancing. The pale evening is a time for rest. And black night falls to gently end the day. The speaker certainly identifies with darkness, blackness, and the night, but the poem makes clear that light and dark are important elements in his dream of well being. This sentiment, it could be argued, expresses Hughes's understanding and insistence of the humanity of both Whites and Blacks. At an early age Hughes made friends with and understood the experiences of both White and Black Americans. He was profoundly aware of his own heritage of color and much of his life's work was devoted to giving voice to particularly Black concerns, but he was cognizant of the dangers of all kinds of racism, whether directed at Blacks or Whites. "Dream Variations," then, seems to indicate this mindfulness of the essential humanity of people of all backgrounds, Black and White, as the poet identifies strongly with darkness and blackness but shows both light and dark as important aspects of the speaker's dream.

Hughes's simple work, when examined closely in the context of the poet's life and influences, has levels of meaning that make reading it a rich and rewarding experience. The use of the dream as a subject is particularly appropriate subject for a poem, as both dreams and poems invite interpretation through the use of imagination and knowledge. No doubt more detailed investigation of Hughes's personality, interests, and life combined with creative interpretation of the poem's ideas and symbols will yield further insights into this seemingly straightforward but interestingly complex poem.

Source: Uma Kukathas, Critical Essay on "Dream Variations," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about various forms of literature. In the following essay, Poquette explores Hughes's use of imagery and pattern in his poem.

Langston Hughes became popular during a period in the 1920s commonly known as the Harlem Renaissance, a time when a number of black writers emerged in society. Unlike many of his peers, who focused on poems about middle and upper class blacks, Hughes strived to be the voice of the common African-American people. In one of his first poems, "Dream Variations," Hughes imagines two African scenes of natural tranquility, which are a stark contrast to the oppressive, lower-class life most African Americans faced during this time period in "white" America. Through the poem's imagery and pattern, Hughes emphasizes this contrast, leaving the reader with a sense that the inequalities that blacks face in white society are unnatural.

"Dream Variations" is a poem set in Africa, a place with which many African Americans have tried to identify, especially during the Harlem Renaissance. "Many of Hughes's best early poems explored the nature of, and the beauty in, the African element of African American identity," says David Roessel in *American Writers: Retrospective Supplement*.

Although "Dream Variations" depicts African scenes, it is also infused with overt black and white references that invoke the racial discrimination of 1920s America, and paint it as unnatural. This main polarity (or opposite)□black Africa as natural vs. white America as unnatural□is emphasized throughout the poem through the use of several differences in imagery and pattern.

The poem is divided into two stanzas, which feature extremely similar wording. It is the subtle differences in these words that give the poem its strong imagery. The most noticeable difference in image is the change from the first stanza to the second. In the first stanza, the persona□the voice that speaks to the reader in the poem□rests "beneath a tall tree," while in the second stanza, through the use of a metaphor, the persona becomes the tree.

A close comparison of the two stanzas in the poem reveals that the tree, which represents nature, is the ideal to which the human persona in the first stanza strives. The first stanza begins as follows:

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.

With the exception of the first line, which is identical in both stanzas, the poet changes certain words in this four-line sentence from the first stanza to the second. In the second

stanza, the first line changes from "In some place of the sun" to "In the face of the sun." As a product of nature, the tree is more in touch with other aspects of nature, like the life-giving sun. Because of this, a tree is always "in the face" of the sun, while a human can only ever be in "some place" of the sun.

In the third line of the second stanza, "To whirl and to dance" from the first stanza gets upgraded to a much more emphatic "Dance! Whirl! Whirl!" When the persona is a tree, the dancing and whirling is more vibrant. This is a curious idea, because in the physical world, a human has more capability for movement than a tree. By giving the tree the greater freedom of movement within the context of the poem, Hughes demonstrates the fact that a tree with physical roots has more freedom than a black man in a white man's society, which is supposed to be free.

One of the most striking differences comes in the change from "the white day" in the fourth line of the first stanza to "the quick day" in the corresponding line of the second stanza. Since days are not usually described as "white," the word takes on a special connotation, or emotional meaning, within the poem. The days in the first stanza are "white," because the black persona is in a white man's world, and so is forced to view the world as white. But a tree, like other forms of nature, does not view the world in terms of black and white. Instead, the tree views the day by the passage of time. For a tree, one day in its long life would, in fact, be viewed as "quick."

The imagery in the second half of each of the stanzas serves to further the idea of Africa as pure and natural. In both stanzas, night is viewed as a gentle or tender force, which is "dark like me" and "black like me," respectively. The persona, both as a man and a tree, identifies with the color and comfort of the dark night, which symbolizes the protective quality of Africa. This is opposed to Hughes's white world, where all things "black" or "dark" are looked upon with mistrust or seen as inferior.

These examples serve to illustrate the differences between the artificiality of humanity□ especially as it existed in a racially oppressed America□and the purity of nature, as embodied by the ideal African homeland.

In other poems, Hughes lashed out at white America, using angry language to express his views toward racial discrimination. But with this poem, and certain others, he took a different approach to express his views. "Prejudice does not always stir Hughes to resentful poetic tones," says James A. Emanuel in his entry for Twayne's United States Authors Series Online. "He sometimes turns toward nature, toward innocent forms of life, to suggest that racial discrimination is a hybrid creature of man-made, aberrant principles."

Hughes's dream is to live in a world that embraces the simplicity of nature, as in the Africa of his heritage. This simplicity is also emphasized by the pattern of the poem. Nearly all of the words in "Dream Variations" are one-syllable words. The words are chosen for their ability to sum up a concept simply, so that the reader is left with a concrete image, without having to struggle with the difficult or unfamiliar words that some poets employ.

This simplicity is extended from the words themselves to the lines of the poem. The first eight lines of each stanza share the same end rhyme scheme, in most cases repeating the same end word from each line in the first stanza to its corresponding line in the second stanza. It is only the ninth and last line of the first stanza, "That is my dream!" that is missing from the second stanza. Many critics have commented on this conspicuous omission. Emanuel suggests that the ninth line in the first stanza "should have been removed," while R. Baxter Miller, in *The Art & Imagination of Langston Hughes*, suggests that the top heavy structure with a long first stanza and shorter second stanza signifies "the possible dwindling of the dream" through the progression of the poem.

However, if viewed from a simplistic standpoint, the extra line in the first stanza serves to inform the reader that the persona is in fact dreaming, something that a reader would not know otherwise. So if this is the case, why is it not mirrored in the second stanza, as with all of the other lines? In the second stanza, the persona is living as a tree. If a reader is to assume that nature is the ideal, as Hughes goes to painstaking lengths to demonstrate, then the tree, a form of nature, is already living that ideal, and has no need to dream.

Other patterns in the second stanza support the notion that the persona is literally thinking like a tree. The fifth and sixth lines, "Rest at pale evening . . ." and "A tall, slim tree . . ." make deliberate use of an ellipsis at the end of each line, whereas in the first stanza, each corresponding line has no punctuation at all. As stated before, the subtle differences between corresponding lines in the two stanzas of this poem point to Hughes's greater intentions. In poetry, ellipses introduce a pause into the reading, causing the reader to deliberately slow down and ponder the effect of the words. In this case, the use of ellipses signifies the deep, natural resting quality of the tree. This is unlike that of the human persona in the first stanza, whose rest is touched upon briefly but is not felt as fully by the reader.

This double pause in the poem sticks out even more due to the pattern of the remainder of the poem. Throughout "Dream Variations," Hughes uses a line of action followed by a line of passive description. For example, look at the first four lines of the second stanza:

To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
Till the quick day is done.

In these lines, one can see how the first and third lines feature an active verb or verbs, while the second and fourth lines feature a passive description. This alternating pattern of action/description is repeated throughout, and it sets up a sing-song pattern, which causes the reader to race through the poem. If read according to the punctuation, a reader needs only halt for a long period of time at two points: the eighth line of the first stanza, "Dark like me□" and the double-pause of the tree's rest, mentioned above. By tying these two points together through pauses, Hughes links the "dark" persona to the tree that is resting at pale evening, and the tree that is peacefully resting in the second

stanza fulfills the dream of the "dark" human persona in the first. In Hughes's America, African Americans were denied the American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and many leaned toward their native Africa to find hope and the fulfillment of their dreams. In *The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. 1*, Arnold Rampersad noted that in this poem and other poems "written in Africa, Hughes responded emotionally to the most dangerous lies of European colonialism," which promised all Americans that they could achieve their dreams. In the end, through his carefully crafted poem that uses specific differences in images and pattern, Hughes expresses his own dream: a life that mimics the freedom and colorblindness of nature, as idealized by his natural, African heritage. This is a stark contrast to the unnatural oppression and prejudice that Hughes and other African Americans faced in the white America of the 1920s.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "Dream Variations," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

Voices and Visions: Langston Hughes, The Dream Keeper (1999) is a video biography that illustrates the importance of Langston Hughes as a poet and as the voice of African Americans and a champion of black artists.

In *Langston Hughes Reads His Poetry* (1995), Hughes reads from his works and shares his experiences growing up black in the early- to midtwentieth century in an openly segregated and prejudiced society.

The Academy of American Poets maintains a Hughes web page at http://www.poets.org (last accessed January, 2002) with links to other interesting sites.

Topics for Further Study

Research the different ways that dreams are used and understood in different cultures. For example, find out how dreaming is viewed in the Australian aboriginal tradition, in ancient African myths and legends, and in modern Western theories of psychoanalysis. What do these various approaches to understanding dreams have in common?

Try to find examples in Western literature where "blackness" has been used to stand for negative, sinister, or depraved and evil qualities and where "whiteness" has been looked upon as implying purity, innocence, and goodness.

Examine how the "American dream" has been depicted in American literature. Is there a difference between how the idea has been expressed by white writers and black writers?

Explore how the black nationalism movement has evolved since the 1920s.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Marcus Garvey, the charismatic and controversial leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, gains popularity with his call for education, solidarity, and black pride to help lift African Americans out of the cycle of poverty and despair that is a result of racism.

Today: Minister Louis Farrakhan, the charismatic and controversial leader of the Nation of Islam, preaches a message of black pride and solidarity to help African Americans forge their own identity separate from white American culture.

1920s: Racial tensions result in violence in a number of U.S. cities, including Chicago, Houston, and Philadelphia.

Today: Racial tensions in many U.S. cities are high after the 2001 racial riots in Cincinnati following the police shooting of a young black man.

1920s: African Americans work at the lowest paying jobs available, usually as janitors, dishwashers, garbage collectors, and domestics, because they lack education for better jobs. Further, many unions work actively to exclude them from their trades and organizations.

Today: More than one-third of all black families lives in poverty, while 10 percent of white families can be officially classified as poor. The percentage of black high school graduates going on to college is nearly the same as that of white high school graduates, but a far smaller proportion of blacks than whites complete high school.

What Do I Read Next?

The great American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.'s most famous speech, "I Have a Dream," (1963) looks forward to a time when all races can participate fully in the "American dream."

In his poem "Harlem" (1951), Hughes asks his famous question: "What happens to a dream deferred?" referring to the fact that African Americans' hopes for political and economic freedom were not able to be realized because of racist attitudes.

The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African- American Culture, 1920-1930 (1996), by Steven Watson, traces the influential African-American cultural movement, of which Hughes was a key figure, that changed the way black intellectuals and artists thought about themselves.

Children of the Dream: Our Own Stories of Growing Up Black in America (2000), edited by Laurel Holliday, presents the stories of thirtyeight African Americans who explain what it is like to grow up black amidst racial prejudice.

Race Matters (1995), by Cornel West, is a collection of highly readable essays that explore the problem of race in America.

Further Study

Berry, Faith, *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem*, Lawrence Hill, 1983.

This biography of Hughes is written for a popular audience; it deals with the poet's personal and family life as well as his career as an artist.

Emanuel, James A., *Langston Hughes*, Twayne Publishers, 1987.

Emanuel's work provides a detailed examination of Hughes's works from a literary rather than a sociological perspective (which had been traditionally used when looking at the writings of African Americans), emphasizing the writer's variety of expression.

Jemie, Onwuchekwa, *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*, Columbia University Press, 1976.

Jemie provides an introduction to Langston Hughes's poetry limited to his collected poems (about a third of the author's output) with a brief glance at the prose fiction, delineating Hughes's major themes and techniques, especially as they relate to African-American oral tradition.

Locke, Alain, "Youth Speaks," in *Survey Graphic*, Vol. 4, March 1925.

This article that appears in the issue of the journal in which "Dream Variations" appeared in 1925, is written by the well-known African-American professor of philosophy who championed the work of young black artists. Locke praises the achievement of young black writers of the period.

Miller, R. Baxter, *The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes*, The University Press of Kentucky, 1989.

Miller's book is a detailed study that considers the complex patterns of meaning in the literary imagination of Langston Hughes.

Bibliography

Baldwin, James, "Sermons and Blues," in *New York Times Book Review*, March 29, 1959, p. 6.

Barksdale, Richard, *Langston Hughes: The Poet and His Critics*, American Library Association, 1977, p. 4.

Brinkley, Alan, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993, pp. 628-29.

Dickinson, Donald C., *A Bio-Bibliography of Langston Hughes, 1902-1967*, Archon Books, 1967, p. 29.

Emanuel, James A., "Langston Hughes," in *Twayne's United States Authors Series Online*, G. K. Hall & Co., 1999.

Garvey, Marcus, "Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World," in *Modern Black Nationalism from Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan*, edited by William L. van Deburg, New York University Press, 1997, pp. 24-31.

Hoagwood, Kimberly, "Two States of Mind in 'Dream Variations,'" in *Langston Hughes Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall 1983, pp. 16-18.

Hudson, Theodore R., "Langston Hughes' Last Volume of Verse," in *CLA Journal*, June 1968, pp. 345-48.

Hughes, Langston, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1940, pp. 18-26, 325.

Ikonne, Chidi, "Affirmation of Black Self," in *From Du Bois to Van Vechten: The Early New Negro Literature, 1903- 1906*, reprinted in *Langston Hughes*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, 1989, pp. 151-68.

Lawler, Mary, *Marcus Garvey: Black Nationalist Leader*, Chelsea House Publishers, 1988.

Miller, R. Baxter, "Deep Like the Rivers," in *The Art & Imagination of Langston Hughes*, The University Press of Kentucky, 1989, pp. 55-56.

Potamkin, Harry Allan, "Old Clothes," in *Nation*, Vol. CXXIV, No. 3223, April 13, 1927.

Rampersad, Arnold, "On the Big Sea," in *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Vol. 1, Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. 78-79.

Roessel, David, "Langston Hughes," in *American Writers: Retrospective Supplement*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1998, pp. 19-214.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

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

Project Editor
David Galens

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

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

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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

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

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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