Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter Study Guide

Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter by Robert Bly

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" appears in Robert Bly's 1962 collection of poems, *Silence in the Snowy Fields*. Like many of Bly's poems, it is short□only five lines. It appears midway through the second section of the collection titled "Awakening." The first section is "Eleven Poems of Solitude," and the last section is "Silence on the Roads." Bly, who was born and has lived most of his life in rural Minnesota, describes driving to town on a cold and snowy night to mail a letter and recounts the revelation he has during the event. It's easy to see why Bly placed it in the "Awakenings" section, as it details the speaker's sudden recognition of how the meaningful can be found in the mundane. Like many of Bly's poems, "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" is quite accessible. It uses a few well-placed and well-drawn images to evoke the feelings of solitude and wonder from the natural world, and it contains the kind of "leaping image" for which Bly's poetry has been celebrated, and criticized. There are other poems for which Bly is better known, but "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" is significant because it is typical of the kind of poems Bly wrote during the early 1960s.

Author Biography

For a twenty-first-century poet, Robert Bly is an anomaly in that he does not make his living teaching at a university or college. Instead, Bly earns his keep writing, not only poetry but nonfiction as well, on subjects such as the men's movement and the family. He has made a career out of his own spiritual and political preoccupations, a feat very few poets have accomplished. Born in Madison, Minnesota, on December 23, 1926, to farmer Jacob Thomas Bly and his wife, Alice, Bly attended a one-room schoolhouse in Lac Qui Parle County in the western part of the state. While in the navy during World War II, his literary interests blossomed thanks to shipmates Marcus Eisenstein and Warren Ramshaw, who encouraged him to write and read as much as he could, especially poets Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman. Bly transferred to Harvard after studying writing at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. At Harvard, he met poets Adrienne Rich, Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, and Donald Hall, who has remained a lifelong supporter and friend, and his future wife, Carolyn McLean.

After taking a master of fine arts degree in creative writing at the University of Iowa, he traveled to Norway on a Fulbright grant to translate Norwegian poetry. While in Norway, Bly read the poetry of Latin American surrealist poets such as Pablo Neruda and European surrealists such as Georg Trakl, Tomas Transtroemer, and Juan Ramon Jiminez. The writing of these poets inspired Bly to rethink his own poetics, and he began composing a kind of verse that used the image to evoke a complicated range of emotion and thought. Bly's interest in myth, evolutionary neurology, and Jungian psychology burgeoned and formed the basis for his theory of the image, which he outlines in *Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations*. Such an image makes connections between the human mind/brain and the external world, which can be intuited but not explained. "Leaping images" appear in many of the poems in Bly's first collection, *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (1962), including "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" and "Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River." Exploring the ways in which imagery, both verbal and iconic, forms a bridge between inner and outer worlds has been a thematic constant in Bly's work.

In the early part of his career, Bly protested against United States involvement in Vietnam, and many of his poems addressed explicitly political subjects; but, in the latter half of his career, he has become more interested in gender and masculinity. In 1990, he published *Iron John: A Book about Men*, one of the seminal books of the men's movement, and he continues to lecture and write on men's issues, Jungian psychology, and European mythology. Bly is a heavily decorated poet. His awards include the National Book Award in 1968 for *The Light Around the Body*, a Fulbright grant (1956-1957), the Amy Lowell traveling fellowship (1964), a Guggenheim fellowship (1964), and a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship (1967). He has written, edited, and translated scores of books. Some of his most recent titles include *Eating the Honey of Words: New and Selected Poems* (1999) and *Morning Poems* (1997), in which Bly pays homage to his friend and mentor, poet William Stafford.

Poem Text

It is a cold and snowy night. The main street is deserted.
The only things moving are swirls of snow.
As I lift the mailbox door, I feel its cold iron.
There is a privacy I love in this snowy night.
Driving around, I will waste more time.

Plot Summary

First line

The first line of "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" elaborates on the action of the poem's title, setting the scene. Two simple declarative sentences create the image of emptiness. The cold and the snow evoke the season and, for readers familiar with Bly's work, the upper Midwest where Bly lives and where many of his poems are set. The deserted main street evokes solitude and, perhaps, the presence of death. The fact that it is a "town" and not a city suggests that the speaker is driving in from a rural setting.

Second line

This image focuses the reader's attention on the swirling snow and emphasizes the utter desolation of the street. It matters little whether or not one is familiar with snowy nights in the upper Midwest. A tumbleweed could just as easily stand in for the "swirls of snow." What's important here is the speaker's attention to the only thing moving, as it figuratively "freezes" the reader's imagination for an instant.

Third line

Like the speaker, readers too feel the "cold iron" of the door. By bringing the sense of touch to the poem, Bly emphasizes the "embodiedness" of the speaker, even as he evokes his selfconsciousness in other parts of the poem. This is typical of much Bly poetry.

Bly's epigraph to *Silence in the Snowy Fields* is a quotation from the sixteenth-century German mystic, Jacob Boehme: "We are all asleep in the outward man." Boehme's writing heavily influences Bly and appears frequently in the poet's work as both epigraph and inspiration. The following Boehme quotation, which appears in Bly's second collection of poems *The Light Around the Body* (1967), helps to explain the first quotation and is a key concept from which much of Bly's poetry is generated:

> For according to the outward man, we are in this world, and according to the inward man, we are in the inward world. . . . Since then we are generated out of both worlds, we speak in two languages, and we must be understood also by two languages.

Touching the "cold iron" of the mailbox jolts the speaker from the inner world of his thoughts and perceptions into the outer world of sensation.

Fourth line

The poem's tone changes in this line, as the speaker describes his emotional response to his perceptions for the first time. The "privacy" is akin to anonymity, as the street is deserted and the snowy scene forces the speaker inside of himself, where he can have such a thought as that contained in this line.

Fifth line

Like the previous four lines, this one is endstopped. An end-stopped line is a line of verse that completes a grammatical unit, usually with a mark of punctuation at its end. Each line, then, is a selfcontained unit of meaning and does not rely on the preceding or succeeding line to make sense. The series of end-stopped lines in this poem give it a filmic feel, as if each line were a separate shot.

This last line is an example of the "leaping" that occurs in so much Bly poetry. The leap, a manifestation of unconscious desire, occurs when something happens or an image appears that is frequently the opposite of what the reader expects. In this case, readers expect that the speaker will comment on the natural world or the idea that life is short. Rather, he says, "Driving around, I will waste more time." This sentiment belies the tone of the previous description, which suggests that watching the snow fall on the deserted street is an invaluable experience. But this line is ironic; the speaker does not really believe he is "wasting time," at least not in the conventional sense of the term. Rather, he assigns value to "driving around" doing nothing but more of what he has already done: basking in the privacy of his inner world while enjoying the austere winter beauty.

Themes

Human Condition

Conventional wisdom has it that human beings are different from animals in that they have language and are aware of their mortality. This awareness, which occurs more frequently in some people than in others, causes people to act in ways they otherwise might not. For example, in a wellknown poem, "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," by Bly's friend James Wright, the speaker is enraptured by the assorted wonders of nature he sees, such as butterflies, "a field of sunlight between two pines," and a chicken hawk, and yet he concludes: "I have wasted my life." Bly's speaker, on the other hand, though also captivated by the (snowy) natural world□albeit from the driver's seat of a car rather than a hammock□comes to a different conclusion: that he will "waste more time" by "driving around." These two starkly different responses to experiences that led the speakers from the outer to the inner world imply things about the their respective attitudes towards the value of their own pasts and of their current lives. Another famous poem that follows the same emotional trajectory as the Bly and Wright poems is Ranier Maria Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," only Rilke lovingly details the statue of Apollo, rather than nature, before coming to the conclusion: "You must change your life."

City and Country

Since the Industrial Revolution, the differences between city life and rural life have frequently been a theme in literature, with the country variously representing agrarian ideals, naiveté, simplicity, and wide-open spaces, and the city representing opportunity, sophistication, and a more hurried pace. Bly implies distinctions between the two in the title of his poem, though he never explicitly addresses features of either. However, by describing the town's "main street" as "deserted," he does turn expectations on their head, as readers usually associate a town's main street with people. That he has to drive to town to mail a letter suggests that he lives in a remote part of the state. He also counters expectations for what one does in the city, in the last line of the poem when he writes, "Driving around, I will waste more time." Cities are often places of activity and culture, where one could "waste time" doing a variety of things such as shopping, eating, and so forth.

Consciousness

Consciousness always has an object; it is conscious of something. Bly's speaker is conscious of the emptiness around him as he drives into town and mails a letter. He emphasizes this in the word "deserted" and the phrase "the only things moving." The "privacy" he feels stems from this sense of emptiness, brought on by the snowy winter weather and the absence of people. Curiously, he finds pleasure in this emptiness, as it

directs his attention inward at his emotions. In the poem's last line, he has an epiphany, or revelation, of just how much he loves the privacy and wants it to continue.

Style

Tone

Tone refers to the attitude of the speaker towards his subject. In "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter," Bly evokes feelings of contentment through his description of a deserted city street scene, the simple action of mailing a letter, the "privacy" of his solitude, and the desire to prolong the experience, expressed in the line, "Driving around, I will waste more time."

Image

At its simplest level, an image is a mental picture created in a reader's mind by the writer's words. Images, however, can also relate to senses other than vision. Bly uses visual imagery for describing the setting of the town and tactile imagery in describing the action of mailing the letter, when the speaker feels the "cold iron" of the mailbox door. The concluding image, of the speaker "driving around," is a kind of "leaping image" for which Bly's writing has become known. Leaping images, according to Bly, are meant to evoke a reality beyond that which we see. These images "leap" back and forth between the conscious and the unconscious mind and often evoke feelings or thoughts surprising to even the writer himself.

Irony

The last line of the poem contains an example of verbal irony. A statement can be verbally ironic when it implies a meaning sharply different from what it expresses. In this case, Bly is winking at readers when he states, "I will waste more time," as the obvious joy he experiences belies the idea that time is being wasted.

Historical Context

When Bly published this poem in the early 1960s, a number of poets were using what poetcritic Robert Kelley in 1961 called the "deep image." Kelley used this term to describe a type of image that could fuse the experience of the poet's inner self and his outer world. Bly had been experimenting with this image in the late 1950s in poems he wrote for various journals and magazines. During his Fulbright year in Norway in 1956-1957, Bly began reading European and Latin American surrealist poets such as Georg Trakl, Pablo Neruda, and Caesar Vallejo, and he quickly embraced their use of the image to probe the unconscious mind. His translation of their work in his and William Duffy's literary magazine, *The Fifties*□renamed *The Sixties* and *The Seventies* in subsequent decades□helped introduce these poets to American readers. Bly considered these writers practitioners of the "new imagination" and their use of the image dramatically different from how poets such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams used it□to describe the empirical world of things as accurately as possible. Other well-known contemporary poets of the deep image include James Wright, W. S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, William Stafford, and Diane Wakowski.

Bly's magazine was part of the explosion of small press literary journals in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Writing in the late 1970s, critic Charles Molesworth claims, "No literary history of the last twenty years would be complete without reference to Bly's magazine, *The Sixties*." Other small press magazines of the time include Charles Olson's *Black Mountain Review*, John Logan's *Choice*, Jerome Rothenberg's *Poems from the Floating World*, Cid Corman and Robert Creeley's *Origin*, and Kelley's own *Trobar*. In 1958, when Bly was settling down in a Minnesota farmhouse with his first wife, Carolyn McLean, and putting together the first issue of his magazine, an important poetry anthology was published. *New Poets of England and America*, edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson, showcased the work of poets under forty, most of whom adhered to the formal, rational, and often irony-laden verse favored by the New Critics. Two years later, in 1960, Donald Allen's ground-breaking anthology, *New American Poetry 1945-1960*, championed poets descended from the poetic traditions established by Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens. These poets, including beat writers such as Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, and Allen Ginsberg; New York school poets such as Frank O'Hara; and Black Mountain poets such as Robert Creeley and Charles Olson saw form as organic, arising from the subject of the poem itself, not something imposed on it from the outside. For the most part, they rejected the aesthetics of the poets in Hall's anthology, considering them academic and removed from the real world. Bly, who had yet to publish a collection of his own poems, made his first appearance in a major anthology in 1969, in *Naked Poetry*, which contained some of the same poets from Allen's anthology but also included newer voices, most prominently confessional poets such as Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath.

Critical Overview

"Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" is a small poem and mostly overlooked by critics who reviewed *Silence in the Snowy Fields* or who study Bly's poetry. William V. Davis in *Understanding Robert Bly* contends that Bly's voice is most "authentic" in this collection and for that reason it is his "most important book." In noting that most reviewers praised the collection, Richard P. Sugg, in his introduction to Bly's prose and poetry *Robert Bly*, claims that the book contains what he calls "the enduring basis of Bly's work[:] . . . . the psychological theme of man's inward life and the act of perception/discovery necessary to connect with and develop it." Ronald Moran and George S. Lensing, in their study of Bly and his peers, *Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination: Robert Bly, James Wright, Louis Simpson, and William Stafford*, conclude, "The poems of *Silence in the Snowy Fields* are very much of a world" in their treatment of landscape and the small moments in a person's life. Noting the "bare statements" of "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter," and poems like it in the collection, Howard Nelson, in *Robert Bly: An Introduction*, speculates that a first reading of the book is "likely to be a mysterious or mystifying experience" for readers. Nelson points out some of the reservations critics have with the poems, most notably their lack of sophistication and "intellectual density." However, he argues:

> While it is the simplicity and quiet of *Silence in the Snowy Fields* that first strike the reader, the book was a key contribution to that period of great restlessness, energy, and originality in American poetry that began in the 1950s and continued through the 1960s.

Silence in the Snowy Fields remains one of the best-selling poetry titles in Wesleyan University Press's catalogue, forty years after its publication.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of literature and composition. In this essay, Semansky considers the image of driving in Bly's poem.

The image of driving permeates much American literature of the twentieth century. Think of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* or William Least Heat Moon's *Blue Highways*. In these works and countless others, driving is symbolic of the quest for meaning. The act of putting hands to wheel is a metaphor for life's journey. Driving is both a means and an end in itself, signifying the relentless passing of time. Given the country's wide-open spaces and Americans' love of freedom and travel, America's infatuation with the automobile makes sense, especially for writers of prose. Driving often appears as image and theme in poetry, most surprisingly in the work of Bly, a poet most often associated with the natural world. Images of cars and driving appear in numerous Bly poems including "Three Kinds of Pleasure," "Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River," "Driving My Parents Home at Christmas," and many others. "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter," one of Bly's first "driving" poems, is significant in that it foreshadows many of the themes that occupy his later work.

Although Bly has developed the reputation as a poet whose material is grounded in myth and psychology, it should not be surprising that cars show up so frequently in his writing. For someone who has made his living writing and giving readings, workshops, and lectures, it is only natural that he would drive so much and that so much of his remembered experience would be of events that occurred while he was in a car, usually alone. Driving is often a solitary activity, with drivers given to reflection, fantasizing, bouts of nostalgia and regret. Driving long distances in the Midwest, as Bly does, would give one the opportunity to engage in these meditative activities more than most. Bly does not fetishize the car, however; most of the time, he does not detail its make or model or, indeed, provide any specifics other than the fact that he is in transit, being in one place and going another. In this way, then, driving becomes a metaphor for journeying, though Bly's journeys in these poems, at least on the surface, are usually fairly prosaic: mailing a letter, for example.

Literal journeys are integral to myth, symbolic of the process of self-exploration and discovery. Odysseus, for example, endured trials and tribulations through his journeys on Earth and in the underworld before he won the right to come home. Bly's speakers are not nearly as adventurous as Odysseus. They do not fend off monsters or speak with the dead or have themselves strapped to the masts of ships to resist the temptations of sirens. They are modern men who go about their daily business unheroically and whose "adventures" more often than not consist of sudden bursts of awareness of their own emotions, their own mortality.

Life, like driving and like the mail, involves movement and destination, travel. Cars, like mailboxes, are metal containers that shield their contents from the weather and provide them with a degree of anonymity. The "cold iron" of the mailbox door, however, also evokes the coldness of the coffin, another container, this one for goods that have

reached their destination. Bly's speaker makes a trip into town to mail a letter, which itself expresses a desire to communicate with another human being. But, in taking in his surroundings, in paying them attention, he is also communicating with a deeper part of himself, a part that cannot be expressed in any rational way but that takes joy in its singleness, its "privacy." In *The Incorporative Consciousness of Robert Bly*, Victoria Frenkel Harris notes that Bly opens *Silence in the Snowy Fields* with a driving poem, which becomes a metaphor for Bly's deeper journey into self:

> The physical journey is of course a developmental extension of the more important psychic journey recorded in the entirety of Bly's work. Whereas the physical journey is linear and may be completed, the psychic journey has no destination. It is a journey of individuation, continual becoming. As the incorporative consciousness grows, inner and outer energies gradually intermingle, the subjective moment expands, and fixed boundaries give way to energy vibrations in a surrounding, fluctuating world. The identification of separate things is replaced by reciprocal motion whereby the world is internalized, and each centripetal motion enlarges the poet so that his works spring from an increasingly greater psychic reservoir.

Bly's epiphany while mailing his letter, then, adds to that reservoir, while simultaneously springing from it. His is a transcendent poem in the tradition of other driving poems such as Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death." Like Bly's speaker, Dickinson's speaker journeys in a vehicle□a horse-drawn carriage□while describing the natural landscape in symbolic imagery, but unlike Bly's poem, Dickinson's ends with the grave. The speaker in Bly's poem, however, although recognizing that the grave awaits, chooses to "waste" his time "driving around." Of course, he is not really wasting his time, but savoring the joy he is experiencing by extending it.

The speaker's response to the sudden awareness of his mortality is also a response to his awareness of eternity, itself paradoxically embodied in the feeling of emptiness that he evokes in his images of the winter landscape. Rather than becoming anxious that life is short and he should spend what time he has left pursuing worldly gains or "intense" experience, Bly's speaker opts to stay in the moment as long as he can.

That Bly's poems inevitably employ the present tense indicates his desire to embrace the now of living. Driving, especially driving long distances, is an act that often feels automatic and outside time. By using an image such as driving, Bly can employ other poetic techniques such as a speaker who catalogues what he sees as he drives by. This is the approach he uses in "Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River." In three sections, the speaker locates himself in the geography of western Minnesota and then lists what he sees and hears: "The stubble field catch[ing] the last growth of sun / The soybeans . . . breathing on all sides," and so forth. In this poem, he also leaps between

the outer and inner worlds, drawing attention to "This solitude covered with iron" that "Plunges through the deep fields of the night." In characteristic Bly fashion, the register of images heads further and further into the self, so that by the end of the poem the speaker announces: "When I reach the river, the full moon covers it; / A few people are talking low in a boat." By this point in the poem, readers are inside and outside the car at the same time, just as the speaker finds an image that both describes the things of the world and evokes the world of the unconscious. Howard Nelson claims that the organizational strategy of this poem is similar to the strategy Bly uses throughout *Silence in the Snowy Fields*: "The poem . . . expresses movements that are fundamental to *Snowy Fields*: movements towards the earth and into what lies beyond the rational, well-lit parts of the mind."

The movement "towards the earth" is also a movement deeper into the brain for Bly, who links the associative leaps in his poems to the leaps human thinking takes among the three parts of the brain: the reptilian, the mammalian, and the human. In his book, *Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations*, Bly writes, "We do not spend the whole day inside one brain, but we flip perhaps a thousand times a day from one brain to the other." Bly concludes that because "there is no central organization to the brain . . . it means there is no 'I.'" This lack of "I" -ness, of individual identity, is illustrated in the final "leap" of many Bly poems, including "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter," in which the speaker's epiphany, or revelation, is an image rooted in one part of the brain "talking" to another part.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Blevins has published essays and poems in many magazines, journals, and anthologies and teaches writing at Roanoke College. In this essay, Blevins considers the risks of the lack of music, rhythm, and metaphor in Bly's poem.

Bly's "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" is like most classic lyric poems in that it manipulates the private meditations of a single speaker to explore a single theme or motif. But, Bly's poem is unlike the classic lyric in that it avoids overt lyricism. The lack of musical devices in "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" is an example of the tendency of many poets of the contemporary American period to privilege clarity and accessibility over sound-play. Linguists and other students of language have generally held that lyricism obscures meaning. In *The Rhetoric of the Other Literature*, the linguist W. Ross Winterowd states

> As poets have always known, it is possible to increase the difficulty of a text—i.e., decrease its readability or accessibility—by creating features that call attention to the language system, namely, rhyme and alliteration. Insofar as attention is diverted from meaning to sound, reading is more difficult.

Poets interested in subverting the elitism of the complicated language systems of the modernists often work in the plain-style, relying on the strategy of speech rather than the lyricism of song to produce and emulate human thought and feeling.

In general, plain-style poems avoid musical flourish by using the common, everyday diction of a conversational speaker. Although some plainstyle poems may replace the musicality achieved by sound-play with images and in this way become image-driven, some plain-style poems avoid image to emphasize conversational or speech-like diction to articulate emotion. In this age in which free verse has proven itself to be a more-than-valid means of writing memorable poems, it is important to ask what the risks of a lack of rhythm and music might be. Bly's poem fails to move not because it is a free verse poem, but because it does not counteract its lack of music with metaphor or the use of original images.

Poets generally agree that the musicality of traditional lyrics helped bards in antiquity remember the verses they were required to recite without the aid of printed text. The rise of the plain-style is attributed in some ways to the invention of the printing press. The more poetry was written down, the less it needed to rhyme sounds and words. Yet other, more archetypally-inclined critics have suggested that the rhyming of sounds and words served psychological as well as technical purposes, suggesting, for example, that life patterns (such as the death of the harvest season each winter giving away to its own re-birth each spring) can be mimicked or emulated in the forms language takes. That is, a poem that produces a sound in its first line will remind people of the comforts of a returning season by repeating that sound in later lines.

Bly's "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" explores the relationship between self and nature and the pleasures of privacy and peace by presenting a speaker who wants to "waste more time" by driving around in a snowstorm. Although Bly's poem attempts to be ironic by wishing to violate the cultural clichés that suggest that humans are happiest when they are in non-threatening (i.e., warm and comforting) weather, this intention is not achieved since Bly's speaker is not actually in the snowstorm, but rather inside his warm and comforting car. In other words, although Bly's speaker attempts to articulate pleasure in the landscape the poem describes, and thus attempts to surprise by suggesting that all of nature is wondrous on some level, the fact that the speaker is in a car, rather than inside the snowstorm itself, undercuts the poem's message. The form Bly has chosen for this observation also undercuts the poem's power.

"Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" is constructed of five end-stopped lines. The marriage of plain-style diction with statement or assertion produces a matter-of-fact tone. That is, the declarative sentences "It is a cold and snowy night" and "The main street is deserted" both describe nothing more or less than the bare facts of the speaker's situation. These lines are notably about the exterior world, rather than the interior world of the speaker. The poem's second line reinforces its first line's plainly-spoken claim with one of the poem's few images: the speaker states that "The only things moving are swirls of snow." The poem's third line places the speaker in a human activity; he tells us that he is lifting "a mailbox door." Coupled with the title, this line suggests that the speaker is mailing a letter. The poem's last two lines articulate a shift from a description of landscape and activity to a statement about the speaker's feelings□he tells readers that because "there is a privacy [he loves] in this snowy night," he will "[drive] around [and] waste more time."

Although Bly's speaker seeks to immerse a reader inside the natural world and make a statement about the possibility of even coldness and darkness producing pleasure by allowing for "privacy" or solitude, the poem's technique undercuts the poem's ability to move readers because it does not rise above its plain approach. That is, although a simple description of plainness could potentially articulate the kind of peacefulness and solitude Bly seeks to describe, the poem fails because its technical plainness is far too plain. Although it is possible to say that the repetition of the pronoun "I" in the poem is a kind of rhyme, the sound of the word is not its purpose. This fact is made clear by the fact that the word is not emphasized by its placement. Although the word "snowy" is repeated in the poem twice, the telling nature of the adjective undercuts lyricality, and may even seem lazyily inarticulate. Images, in comparison, are not often explicit or overtly obvious in meaning. Instead, the meaning of an image is suggested by the way a poet manipulates its presentation□the language, the format, and the subject matter of an image, and poem at large, can all be clues the poet uses to convey a point. The repetition of the sibilant 's' sound in "swirls of snow" in the poem's second line does produce a kind of pleasure, but this pleasure, too, is undercut by the fact that the description is cliché.

Bly's use of adjectives also does not help the poem to move readers. For example, the speaker states that the night is "cold" and "snowy." Although these words help describe the landscape of the poem, the use of comparison would have helped the speaker

compare the night to something else in the world that is "cold" and "snowy." In other words, adjectives in general can undercut a poet's ability to imagine, since, unlike images, they do not require the imaginative leaps that linking unlike things together requires. It is not very difficult, that is, to say that a winter night is "cold" or that snow looks "snowy." The same can be said for the adjective "deserted." Hearing that "The main street is deserted" presents the loose picture of a street void of other people, but it does not depict the speaker's specific street. It does not describe the speaker's landscape in such a way as to distinguish it from all landscapes that could be said to be "deserted." The adjectives in "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" thus make the speaker seem lazy or inarticulate.

Poets writing in the plain-style sometimes counter their use of conversational or speech-like diction with images, replacing the formal artifice of sound-play with the imaginative force of suggesting that one object or feeling in the world is like another object or feeling in the world. By these means, poets and other writers create pictures, making the essentially abstract nature of language more discernible and concrete. Yet, the only two images in "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" are clichés. Bly's suggestion that "The only things moving are swirls of snow" in the poem's second line is the poem's first image, and his suggestion that the "mailbox" door in the poem's third line is like "cold iron" is his second. Although these images could have potentially counteracted the plainstyle mode of this poem, they are clichés. It is too often said that snow "swirls," and maybe even more too often said that hard metals are "cold" and like "iron." Although it might be said that the ultimate point of poetry is to articulate feelings that cannot really be articulated, meaning in poetry, and in most forms of imaginative writing, is inherently tied to style or method. An original observation cannot be felt fully if it is articulated in unoriginal language or terms.

Since "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" focuses on the landscape of a snowstorm, its descriptive power or lack thereof becomes central. That is, the vast majority of the poem seeks to describe "a cold and snowy night" so that the speaker might explain the importance and beauty of privacy and solitude. But the poem's refusal to counter a lack of interest in rhythm with sound play and image as well as its reliance on clichéd descriptions undercuts Bly's ability to articulate this message memorably.

As William H. Gass writes in "The Soul of the Sentence" in *The Habitations of the Word*, "art should not produce a feeling of . . . gloom or dismay, but of energy, wholeness, perfection, joy." Although Bly seeks in "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter" to produce a moment of "energy, wholeness, perfection, [and] joy," he fails because he does not sufficiently counter the frank, declarative statement of the plain-style with sound-devices, metaphors, and images.

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Adaptations

In 1983, Dolphin Tapes released *Robert Bly: Poetry Reading an Ancient Tradition*, in which Bly discusses the oral tradition in poetry. Dolphin Tapes can be reached at P.O. Box 71, Esalen Hot Springs, Big Sur, California 93920.

An audiocassette of Bly reading his poems has been produced by Everett/Edwards. It is titled, *Contemporary American Poets Read Their Work: Robert Bly*.

Bly appears on the recordings *Today's Poets 5*, by Folkways, and *For the Stomach: Selected Poems*, produced by Watershed Tapes in 1974. Watershed Tapes are distributed by Inland Book Company, P.O. Box 120261, East Haven, Connecticut 06512.

Bly's positions on the men's movement can be found on the video *A Gathering of Men* (1991), with Bill Moyers, available from Mystic Fire Video, P.O. Box 9323, South Burlington, Vermont 05407.

Brockport Writers Forum and the State University of New York at Brockport's English Department produced a videotape titled *Robert Bly: Interviews and Readings*.

A Man Writes to a Part of Himself (1978), a videotape of Bly reading and lecturing, is available from Intermedia Arts, 425 Ontario St. SE, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55414.

Sound Horizons distributes a recording of Bly reading poety. It is titled *Robert Bly: An Evening of Poetry*. The company can be reached at 250 West 57th Street, Suite 1517, New York, New York 10107.

In an audiocassette produced and distributed by Ally Press in 1987 called *Robert Bly: Fairy Tales for Men and Women*, Bly reads poems and applies psychoanalysis to them. Ally Press can be reached at 524 Orleans Street, St. Paul, Minnesota 55107.

Topics for Further Study

Write a short poem that uses the kind of "leaping image" that Bly uses in his poem and then read it to your class. Discuss whether or not the image is successful in evading a reader's cliché expectations without foreshadowing that evasion.

Write a parody of Bly's poem and then compose a short essay explaining how your poem is a parody. Hold a poetry slam in your class, competing to see whose parody is best.

Would Bly's poem be successful if he described emailing a letter as opposed to "snail mailing" one? Discuss in groups and report your findings to the class.

Research other "deep image" poets such as Louis Simpson, W. S. Merwin, and James Wright. How do they compare to Bly? Read representative poems of the poets and then have classmates vote on their favorite, defending their choices.

Make a list of what you would do if told that you had only six months to live. Compare this list to that of your classmates and discuss similarities and differences. Would you "waste time" delightfully as Bly's narrator does, or do you think your perspective of wasted time would change in the face of your mortality? How might Bly react to that same situation, especially considering the possibility that death is, perhaps, suggested in the poem?

Bly contends that human beings have at least two selves, the spiritual, internal self and the political, external self. Make a list of features describing how you understand these two selves. Write a short dialogue exploring how they would converse with each other.

Divide the class into groups. Each group finds as many "driving" poems as possible and brings them to class to read. Discuss how the act of driving is used in the various poems. Is it used symbolically? Metaphorically? Discuss the themes of the poems and then hold a class vote to determine which poem is most popular.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: The United States Post Office begins widespread implementation of mechanized letter- sorting machines and high-speed optical character readers.

Today: After a few postal workers die and others fall sick from inhaling the deadly sporeforming bacterium Bacillus anthracis (anthrax) sent in letters, the postal service implements a process for irradiating the mail to destroy the presence of any biohazardous material.

1960s: Sixty percent of the world's automobiles are in the United States.

Today: Ford and rival General Motors Corporation, two of the world's largest automobile producers, predict that United States vehicle sales will drop about 10 percent in 2002 from the previous year's near-record high.

1960s: The life expectancy for American males is 66.6 and for females 73.1.

Today: The life expectancy for American males is 74.3 and for females 79.1.

What Do I Read Next?

Bly's national best-seller, *Iron John: A Book about Men* (1990), details the poet's thoughts about and experiences with the emotional lives of men. For those interested in men's issues and the men's movement, this is a good book to read.

Talking All Morning (1980) is Bly's first collection of interviews. Material covers the late 1960s and the 1970s and reflects the subjects that inform Bly's writing, such as brain physiology, political poetry, and the ancient "Great Mother" spirituality.

Silence in the Snowy Fields (1962) is Bly's first full-length collection of poems and contains "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter."

In *The Sibling Society* (1996), Bly argues that Americans live in a "fatherless" society in which adults do not mature but continue to behave as siblings, arguing and fighting with one another. Bly uses mythology, legends, and poetry to tell his story.

Bly won the National Book Award for *The Light Around the Body* (1967). It contains some of his most frequently anthologized poems and is more explicitly political in tone and subject matter than his previous work.

Those interested in Bly's poetic theories, many based on evolutionary psychology, physical anthropology, and the structure of the human brain, will want to read *Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations*, published in 1975 by Beacon Press.

Ronald Moran and George Lensing's book entitled *Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination: Robert Bly, James Wright, Louis Simpson, and William Stafford* (1976) presents Bly's work with three other prominent poets associated with the deep image.

Further Study

Davis, William V., *Understanding Robert Bly*, University of South Carolina Press, 1988.

Davis provides a thoughtful and accessible assessment of Bly's work from his first volume through his 1986 volume, *Loving a Woman in Two Worlds*.

Kay, Jane Holtz, *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America and How We Can Take It Back*, University of California Press, 1998.

Kay, a planning critic for the *Nation*, uses her background to discuss the history of the automobile and its political, architectural, personal, social, geographic, and economic impact.

Peseroff, Joyce, ed., *Robert Bly*, University of Michigan Press, 1984.

This critical anthology, part of the University of Michigan Press "Under Discussion" series, is packed with essays by Charles Molesworth, Charles Altieri, James F. Mersmann, Victoria Harris, and Wayne Dodd, all major voices in contemporary poetry criticism.

Zielinski, Sue, and Gordon Laird, *Beyond the Car: Essays on the Auto Culture*, Steel Rail Publishing, 1995.

This anthology contains essays by writers such as Jane Jacobs, Michael Replogle, Joyce Nelson, and Marcia Lowe who examine car culture, the auto economy, urban planning, international development, and alternatives to the automobile.

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□, *The Light around the Body*, Harper & Row, 1967, p. 38.

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Molesworth, Charles, *The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry*, University of Missouri Press, 1979, 112-139.

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BOOKRAGS

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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

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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