Drought Year Study Guide

Drought Year by Judith Wright

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Contents

Drought Year Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Poem Text....5

Plot Summary....6

Themes....8

Style....10

Historical Context....11

Critical Overview....13

Criticism....14

Critical Essay #1....15

Adaptations....18

Topics for Further Study....19

Compare and Contrast....20

What Do I Read Next?....21

Further Study....22

Bibliography....23

Copyright Information....24

Introduction

If Americans know any of the work of one of Australia's premier poets, Judith Wright, they are likely to know "Drought Year." The main reason is the poem's inclusion in the popular American collection *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (1988). "Drought Year" is among Wright's most distinctively Australian poems because of its use of plants, animals, and sites specific to Australia. As such, the poem serves as an excellent introduction to not only the work of Wright, but modern poetry from the "land down under."

"Drought Year" is from Wright's third volume of poetry, *The Gateway* (1953). The poem's narrator finds herself witness to a drought in the Australian outback, a witnessing that becomes a warning, one repeatedly punctuated by the cries of dingoes, wild dogs indigenous to Australia. Wright represents the drought as nature, powerful and intimidating, a nature to be avoided. At the same time, the animals and plants subject to the drought represent another side of nature: nature as victim—except, that is, the poem's wagtail, an Australian bird taking advantage of the drought's killing fields by pecking out the eyes in a "seething skull." While Wright's drought is, in no uncertain terms, a hellish matter, the multiple kinds of nature she portrays (frightful drought, tormented animals, opportunistic wagtail) renders nature too complex to easily sum up. This is most likely the reason Wright selected the dingoes' enigmatic cries as the poem's recurrent and eerie motif.

Author Biography

Wright was born May 31, 1915, and raised outside Armidale in Australia's most populous state, New South Wales. She grew up in the rural Australian landscape, the oldest child of three in a well-off and literate family. Wright was fortunate enough to spend her childhood reading a great deal, especially poetry, which her mother had read to her since Wright was very young. Wright's first formal education was through correspondence courses furnished by the New South Wales government to those in rural areas. This afforded the young Wright the advantage of lessened regimentation, a trait often advantageous to a career in poetry. At twelve, the year her mother died, Wright attended the New South Wales Girls' School and there met a teacher who encouraged her to write poetry.

In 1933, Wright, now a teenager, left school. However, she did take one class at the University of Sydney. The light schedule enabled her to read heavily and widely outside class requirements. At twenty-two, Wright traveled through Europe and later, Sri Lanka. The next few years saw her at an array of office jobs, the last as an assistant to a geography professor. With the onset of World War II, she returned home to help out on the family property. In 1943, Wright, now twenty-eight, joined the administrative staff of the University of Queensland. Here, she helped the editor of *Meanjin*produce what would become Australia's most influential literary magazine. In 1946, the editor of *Meanjin*published Wright's first book of poems, *The Moving Image,* a major success in Australian poetry. Two years before, Wright had met her husband, the philosopher J. P. McKinney, who was a large influence on Wright's work. Before McKinney died in 1966, he and Wright became the parents of one daughter.

Wright has published numerous books of poems, including *The Gateway* (1953), which contains her acclaimed "Drought Year." She has also published children's literature and short stories, edited anthologies of poetry, recorded her family's history, and written in the field of conservation. In 1962, she became cofounder and president of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Queensland and served as its president several times thereafter. In this capacity she was instrumental in the effort to save The Great Barrier Reef located off Australia's northeastern coast.

The recipient of numerous important honorary doctorates and awards, Wright eventually garnered Australia's most prestigious literary prize, the Australia-Britannica Award for Literature. In 1970, she was made a fellow in the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the only member elected on the basis of a literary career alone. She also traveled to Canada and India as a representative of the writers of her country, and guest-lectured at numerous universities. In 1992, Wright won the Queen's Prize for Poetry, and in 1995, the Human Rights for Poetry Award, especially for her work for the Aboriginal cause. She sums up her ethos this way: "I have, I suppose, been trying to expiate a deep sense of guilt over what we [white settlers] have done to the country, to its first inhabitants of all kinds, and are still and increasingly doing."

Poem Text

That time of drought the embered air

Burned to the roots of timber and grass.

The crackling lime-scrub would not bear

and Mooni Creek was sand that year.

The dingoes' cry was strange to hear. 5

I heard the dingoes cry

in the whipstick scrub on the Thirty-mile Dry.

I saw the wagtail take his fill

perching in the seething skull.

I saw the eel wither where he curled 10

in the last blood-drop of a spent world.

I heard the bone whisper in the hide

of the big red horse that lay where he died.

Prop that horse up, make him stand,

hoofs turned down in the bitter sand 15

make him stand at the gate of the Thirty-mile Dry.

Turn this way and you will die□

and strange and loud was the dingoes' cry.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4:

These lines depict the drought-benighted landscape. "Embered" and "burned" vividly describe the hot, dry air. The word "bear" in line three can be read in at least two ways: 1) the lime-scrub cannot bear the heat or 2) the lime-scrub cannot bear fruit. "Lime" suggests a certain tartness, which contributes well to the dry scene, and the "Mooni" of dried-up Mooni Creek brings to mind a picture of a waterless moon, a desert landscape where every year is a drought year.

Line 5:

The "dingoes' cry" gives the drought conditions a sense of mystery. Since most Americans have probably never heard a dingo's "cry," an American's likely response is, therefore, to think of a coyote, wolf, or dog's cry instead of a dingo's. Similar in character or not, America's canines can be said to have a strange cry, almost like human wailing. Perhaps then, the association of an Australian dog with its American cousins is not wholly mistaken.

Lines 6-11:

Three animals are present in the second stanza: the dingo, wagtail, and eel. The wagtail benefits from the drought by dining on the dying creatures ("seething" with maggots), the eel is one of those dying, and the dingo's condition is uncertain, strange. The Thirty-mile Dry is the name of the dried up creek or river, and the word "scrub" refers to low trees and bushes, also known as "brush," perhaps because the branches of such shrubs have been used as brushes or scrubbers. "Whipstick scrub" enhances the feeling of a dried up landscape sparse with plants having bare, stickish stems: a brushy, scrubby, bristly plantscape. With the occurrence of the word "blood-drop" in line 11, the ground becomes the flesh of the organism Earth whose lifeblood is water. Thus, the last drop of water/blood means a "spent world," both tired and destroyed by drought.

Lines 12-16:

What is the whispering bone of the dead horse saying? Likely it warns of the drought in the area of the Thirty-mile dry. This is borne out by the narrator' s bidding to turn the horse into a kind of standing, speaking sign. Placed at the entrance of the area, the narrator knows that the horse's horrific presence would effectively warn travelers to stay away. The image of a standing horse carcass is a disturbing gatekeeper to an eerie landscape strewn with rotting carcasses, reverberating with crying dingoes. This is nature both intimidating and victimized, a nature humans should avoid.

Lines 17-18:

Now the horse's whispering becomes manifest: "Turn this way and you will die." As if there were any mistaking the dead horse's warning, the dingoes' cries once again waft through the parched land. In this poem and in this landscape, both the horse's whispering bone and the dingo's throaty howl suggest nature and death as siblings. The whispering and howling warn us that when we meet nature, we should keep our eyes peeled for death, possibly hidden behind the very dry bushes.

Themes

Nature and Its Meanings

Wright is a conservationist as well as a poet. A drought, therefore, might seem a strange subject for an environmentalist intent on giving nature a positive image. Perhaps then, the drought in "Drought Year" is primarily anthropogenic (human-caused), like the Dust Bowl disaster in Thirties America. This would show nature as victimized by human action, something a conservationist might want to stress. There is, however, no evidence for this. Wright's drought seems solely due to lack of rain.

Perhaps Wright meant to reinvigorate nature with awesome power so as to make humans cower, to stop people from swaggering because they dominate the earth. Readers would therefore be meant to identify with the poem's victims: horse, eel, and "seething skull." Still another theory why a conservationist would risk giving nature a negative image is that Wright might have felt she was too romantic about nature. Thus, she decided to depict nature's terrifying aspect, one just as valid as nature with a kindly mien, a nature known as nurturing, beautiful, and victimized. Whatever Wright's motives were, after reading "Drought Year," one is apt to feel glad to be separated from nature, grateful to be sitting under a protective roof, comfortably reading, while piped-in water awaits release behind shiny taps. After reading "Drought Year," one is sure to be happy to be nowhere near the Thirty-mile Dry, relieved he or she is protected from nature by the architecture of culture.

Death

This poem is not so much about drought as about death. However, Wright reminds us that a hot, dry landscape of death, while deadly to some, means life to others, specifically, the wagtail. In "Drought Year," the wagtail is the lone beneficiary of others' dying. The name, "wagtail," would indeed have a cheery effect if it were not for the bird pecking out the eyes of the "seething skull." The horrific image might cause one to ask why Wright put the wagtail in the poem. Was it to show the double-edged nature of drought and death, that some animals benefit while others die? Whether or not this was the case, Wright's depiction of the wagtail might cause the reader to imagine Death, itself, as a wagtail, with horse, eel, and skull as its victims.

The dingoes can be viewed as victims as well, that is, if their cry is read as agonized. While readers are likely to distance themselves from the wagtail, the other animals' deaths and stragglings could function to bring readers closer to animals in general. For animals, like humans, can fall victim to drought. Perhaps this is what Wright, the conservationist, was working on: connecting humans with nature by showing that animals and people are very similar. The human flesh is subject to the same vicissitudes: will a human not curl in a chair as the eel curls in the mud or sympathize

with the fallen horse and the dingoes' agonized cries? On the other hand, others might identify with the wagtail, the survivor turning others' calamities to his own advantage.

Wilderness

While the word *wilderness* in the past commonly signified danger and death, the word has increasingly come to mean a good place, one absent from the harmful influence of humanity. This is a meaning Wright would be likely to support as an environmentalist. However, "Drought Year" was written in 1953, before *wilderness* suggested an undeveloped nature. Wright's wilderness is closer to the older brand: dangerous and deadly, one to avoid, not to seek out, or preserve. However, this depiction does not coincide with Wright's love of nature, thus making it more difficult to understand Wright's portrayal of *wilderness.* Is it deadly and dangerous? Fragile and victimized? Perhaps the answer is: all this and more.

A scientist has been quoted as saying that the reason nature is so variously interpreted is because it can amply accommodate almost any meaning one gives to it. So full of variety is nature that it can be represented by the parks of paradise or the wastelands of hell. The same is almost as true for wilderness, equally represented by droughty desert or life-sustaining rain forest, which suggests that wilderness and nature are probably best summed up by images difficult to decipher. American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) had already spoken to this issue: "Nature," she said, "is a haunted house. Art, a house that wants to be haunted."

Style

"Drought Year" contains three stanzas that successively increase by one line: the first stanza has five lines; the second, six; the third, seven. The overwhelming majority of the poem's lines are in iambic tetrameter and the rhyme scheme, though necessarily different because of variances in each stanza, consists of three sets of end-rhymes: *abacc*in the first stanza, *aabbcc*in the second, and *aab-bccc*in the third. All the poem's rhymes are of one syllable and thus "masculine." In the second stanza, *b* lines end with a slant rhyme. The poem has no enjambment (usually making a poem more like prose and conversation), and this gives "Drought Year" more the character of a lyric, or song-like poem, enhanced by the poem's regular meter and rhyme pattern. The dingoes' cries within the poem also help create a kind of song, like the howls of wolves and coyotes, or the wails of whales and humans□a somewhat strange, tortured, and more importantly, *dry* song, wailing not sobbing.

Historical Context

During World War I, Australian forces fought along with the British in Europe. Years later, in the Second World War, between 1940 and 1942, Australian forces again supported the United Kingdom, this time in the Middle East; after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Australia played a major role in the Pacific theater. Following World War II, the Australian government embarked on a massive immigration program to fill the jobs created by a booming war economy. The success of this program radically altered Australia's demographic composition. Before the war, almost all Australians traced their ancestry to the British Isles, but between 1947 and 1961, nearly half the new immigrants came from southern and eastern Europe, increasing the population of Australia from 7.5 million in 1947, to 11 million in 1966. The increase was due either to immigration or to the children born of immigrants. As expected, with an exploding economy and population, the development of Australia followed apace.

Australia's Labour government was voted out of office in 1949, and beginning in 1950, Australia was ruled for 23 years by the Liberal Country Party (later National Country Party and now National Party) coalition headed by Robert Gordon Menzies (1894-1978). During that period, Australian foreign policy stressed collective security and support for the U.S. presence in Asia. Australia even signed the ANZUS Treaty of mutual military cooperation in 1951 between itself (A), New Zealand (NZ), and the United States (US).

The Menzies years were times of economic expansion, continued population increase, and development. Menzies's government pushed forward the previous administration's initiation of the huge Snowy Mountain hydroelectric project, one of the world's largest civil engineering ventures. When completed, millions of tons of snowmelt annually running down the Australian Alps, through the Snowy River, and into the Pacific Ocean were used to supply much of Australia's electric power. An additional part of the project involved the diversion of water into tunnels to irrigate the dry western plains of New South Wales. A number of roads and freeways were constructed and mineral development— especially uranium production—proceeded as well. Menzies even allowed Britain, from 1952 to 1957, to use Australian land for secretly testing Britain's nuclear capability. Aboriginals were the most affected; they were made to relocate without compensation and many suffered the effects of radiation.

Partly because of subsidies that the Menzies's government offered for oil exploration, a major oil industry arose, particularly after oil was discovered in the new "Royal Range" area. Wool growers also prospered. Between 1945 and 1950, Australia joined Britain, New Zealand, and South Africa in cooperative wool marketing to keep up the price of wool, which rose 30 percent from 1949 to 1950. Pastoralists and graziers especially benefited when scientists introduced myxomatosis into the rabbit population, a disease that decimated wild rabbits to make way for domesticated sheep.

Land devoted to dairy and beef cattle also increased. Primary producers of dairy and meat products snapped up cheap transport, such as trucks and planes, from a

downsizing military. Not only did the Royal Flying Doctor Service expand, but between 1949 and 1953, the Air Beef enterprise attempted to establish itself in the Kimberley Downs to eliminate the waste of droving cattle. The Air Beef enterprise slaughtered the animals at an inland center and then flew the carcasses to market. Though drought ended the scheme, the plan was a harbinger of the new technologies of transportation and communication that would begin changing the face of Australia.

Critical Overview

Few critics appear to have written about "Drought Year," the exception being Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair who selected the poem for *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (1988). Ellmann and O'Clair wrote, "The dingoes' cry in 'Drought Year' reminds us of the unseen world that remains a part of us." Is what Ellmann and O'Clair mean by "unseen world," natural impulse? It is difficult to know since "unseen world" is about as cryptic as the "dingoes' cry."

With so little criticism written on "Drought Year," it helps to examine the critical discussions about the book *The Gateway* (1953)in which the poem appears. Vincent Buckley, in 1957, compared *The Gateway* with Wright's first two books of poems. He provided an analysis of *The Gateway* also applicable to "Drought Year": *"The Gateway,* however, reveals an inversion of the earlier valuesan inversion which is not so complete as it may at first sight appear. In the latest poems [i.e., those in *The Gateway],* nature is seen as possessing a different kind of power, the power not of animistic force but of archetypal symbols. Nature in the first case is a threat; in the second it is a sort of Gnostic script. But in both cases it is equally hypnotic, equally transcendent, and even contemptuous, of ordinary human life." Buckley concluded his commentary with the following assessment: "By the time we get to *The Gateway,* we find a more seriously disabling kind of lapsea lapse caused by the fact that she [Wright] is using her key ideas and images as talismans. The idea is this: 'When you hear the theme music strike up, you know that an important spectacle is going to be presented for your edification and uplift.'" In other words, Buckley suggests Wright is too didactic in *The Gateway,* which is most likely signified in "Drought Year" by its message that nature can be cruel and indifferent.

A. D. Hope, Australia's foremost poet, writing about his friend and colleague in his long essay, *Judith Wright* (1975), mostly concurs with Buckley's evaluation of *The Gateway:* "Judith Wright sometimes forgets another saying of William Blake's: 'The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction.' In fact, from this point on in her poetry and in one way or another, there are moments when the poet seems to lose her certainty, her sureness of touch, her instinct for the right phrase." Hope then breaks off into the way poets are judged, not by low points, but by high ones: "It is the peaks that matter, not the hollows of the plain. Think what a mass of rubbish Wordsworth wrote and took the trouble to publish; and then think again that Wordsworth is one of the great poets of all time. I do not wish to be censorious with Judith Wright because she sometimes writes dull or bad poems and because she sometimes cannot tell the good poems from the bad. But I do wish to say that she seems to me to have been damaged at times by two sterile and destructive poets for whom she has avowed a deep interest: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Jhan Hochman, who holds a Ph.D. in English and an M.A. in cinema studies, is the author of Green Cultural Studies: Nature in Film, Novel, and Theory *(1998). In the following essay, Hochman finds that Wright's portrayal of nature is one not easily summed up, and for that very reason, it is a depiction that could serve environmental concerns.*

"Drought Year" describes a nature that is not one. Multiple players□animals, plants, and elements□might appear to yield a unified image of harsh nature, but subtler and more varied forces are at work. This analysis will begin with the poem's four elements (earth, air, fire, and water), then proceed to the poem's four flora, and finish up with its four fauna. This essay will show that the relationships between the three sets of four characters□four as a traditional symbol of multiplicity within a wholeness represented by twelve□work against understanding nature as an indivisible oneness, a nature identifiable as Mother Nature, or Nature with a capital "N".

All four elements□earth, air, fire, water□discussed by the pre-Socratic, Greek thinker Empe-docles, are represented in Wright's "Drought Year." The poet begins with "embered air," an image combining the extreme heat of embers (as in fire) with air. Sand, called "bitter," can be said to represent earth. The attribution of *bitter* to sand can be read in at least three ways: 1) bitterness of taste, as if one were so thirsty as to eat sand in hopes of water; 2) bitterness of emotion, as when water, not sand or dirt, is expected; or most interestingly 3) bitterness of earth against fire and air, the latter two which show no mercy when they dry up earth's supply of water. These then, are the four elemental characters in Wright's drama.

If Wright's "bitter sand" (earth) is read as bitterness toward Air and Fire for drying up Water, then elemental nature is not a unified entity as is commonly conceived. Instead, nature is multiple, like the gods of Greek myth. In fact, nature, as represented by the four elements, becomes plural enough to be in conflict, or as the expression goes, "at sixes and sevens." Indeed, Wright shows that the expression, "at fours," might work just as well. Empedocles had already configured nature as not one, but four elements, now in conflict (strife), now in cooperation (love). Humans were not important actors in this humanlike soap opera of elemental characters, relationships, and stormy emotions.

In the nature of "Drought Year," as in the philosophy of Empedocles, the elements are also not unified. For this reason: earth is a victim of air and fire; or a victim of air, fire, and water; or, earth and water are victims of air and fire. With this kind of fourfold configuration of elemental nature, blaming an indivisible Nature for drought becomes difficult. Equally difficult is perceiving the universe as a battlefield wherein Nature is pitted against Man. With Wright, nature is a multiple in conflict, a struggle in which humanity does not figure as nature's pawn, victim, or enemy. Wright's multiple nature is in line with an environmental agenda (not surprising since Wright has been an influential environmentalist) because nature, as multiple and in conflict, can no longer be construed as something humanity must constantly defend itself against or subdue in

order to flourish. Wright's (and Empedocles') nature is simply too busy with its own selves to be concerned with, or even cognizant of people. Such an elemental nature is not an enemy but, instead, something to pay attention to (as in spectacle) or something to understand and respect (as with knowledge and people).

And now, the flora of "Drought Year": the "roots of timber and grass" are, Wright says, "burned." So dry is the "lime-scrub," it is "crackling." Even without the word, "crackling," *scrub* already connotes a dry, stunted plant. Couple "scrub" with "lime"-sour bushes, and you not only have a plant unfit to eat but a complement to the "bitter sand" discussed above. Finally, dryness is furthered by "whipstick scrub," a plant imagined as more sticks than leaves. Sticks for whipping yields an image of drought as torture. The association is potent since whipstick scrub can be figured as the victim of drought's elemental torture, or, itself, the torturer of animals trying to eat it. Timber, grass, lime-scrub, whipstick scrub□these are Wright's four plant characters.

These floral actors are not in conflict with each other as were the four elemental characters. Instead, the plants are in conflict with either elements or animals. All the plants are indeed victimized by drought (some or all the elements), but two of the plants can be seen to be also somewhat complicit with the drought. In the line, "the crackling lime-scrub would not bear," the lime-scrub can be read as sour and stingy. Likewise, the whipstick scrub might be viewed as cruel and miserly. Both plants are so devoid of moisture or nutrients that it is understandable that during a drought they might be hated. Again, because Wright's nature is not one (all plants are victims but some, lime-scrub and whipstick scrub, are also villains), nature becomes too divided and conflicted to muster a unified force against humanity, or animals. While individual elements and plants can still be construed as friend or enemy, nature, as a whole, cannot be. Such a conception of nature resembles our impression of our own species (probably an improvement over the way humans think about nature). And though it is true that people still have a long way to go in their treatment of each other, Wright's multiple approach to nature is likely a step in the right direction.

Finally, there are the four fauna: horse, dingoes, wagtail, and eel. The wagtail is a bird with a happy name. It might even be wagging its tail as it eats the eyes or maggots out of that "seething skull." While everything else dies, the wagtail is able to "take his fill." The image is likely to be horrific. But the wagtail is the one animal flourishing during the drought, a situation going against the grain of suffering prevalent throughout the poem. Here, the wagtail, a "good" animal (most birds having good reputations) lives well off the fallen-unfortunate, perhaps humans among them. Even if this is a good animal, it will be hard to like it. On the other hand, there is the eel, an animal most people think is "bad," but whose suffering and dying in "the last blood-drop of a spent world" makes it worthy of sympathy. Where Wright depicts a "good" bird luxuriating on a rotting skull, she also shows a "bad" eel struggling to live. If readers are confused by their dislike of a cheery bird, they are also likely to be about their sympathy for an icky eel. Wright does a marvelous job of mixing up preconceptions of nature. The result is a difficulty in calling nature either good or bad.

Now the last two animals. First, the horse. The dead horse is a rather uncomplicated image in "Drought Year." It is an animal with whom to sympathize, since the horse is considered a "good" animal, and because it has died. What better sign than a propped-up horse carcass to give people the willies, keep them outside the gate of the Thirty-mile Dry? Perhaps only a propped-up human corpse. But if the horse is simple to understand, the dingo is just the opposite. Richard Ellmann and Robert O' Clair, in their introduction to Judith Wright in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (1988), wrote that "The dingoes' cry in 'Drought Year' reminds us of the unseen world that remains a part of us." What this has to do with drought is anyone's guess. A different interpretation from Ellmann and O'Clair might posit the dingoes' cries as vaguely deathlike because the cries (if, that is, they sound like wolves and coyotes) sound like human wails or ululations. Such an attribution is, by the way, in stark contrast to most American horror films, in which howling coyotes and wolves are deathlike because they threaten humanity with death. Wright's dingoes, unlike coyotes and wolves in horror films, do not seem threatening themselves, but instead, seem to warn of threat, specifically of drought conditions. If this is accurate, then the dingo, a *wild* dog, is a version of the domestic dog, "man's best friend," warning and advising us to beware. Whether Ellmann and O'Clair's interpretation of the dingo's cry as "a part of us" is favored, or the dingo's cry as a warning call is preferred, the dingo is an animal readers will likely favor instead of fear. Perhaps the reason is little more than Wright's use of the word "cry" for the dingo's call, a word applicable to mourning the dead or the lack of water.

Still, Wright does make it difficult to attribute to the dingo any particular character, either for or against humans, or for that matter, for or against any of the animals, plants, and elements. This makes the dingo difficult to hate or love, or about which to have any particular feeling. The dingo is nature as strange and difficult to sum up as friend or enemy. Perhaps this was Wright's point all along: that drought, like the dingoes' cries, is so complex as to be strange, so multiple as to make impossible painting the drought landscape with a single brush. And so, nature as well. In the final tally, the single *four-legged* dingo is, itself, a mysterious multiplicity, and, therefore, the best single candidate for a nature whole but not wholly one.

If "Drought Year" is first read as a poem warning of a harsh and punishing Nature, a later reading may show the poem as a complex depiction of a complex landscape of victims and victors, sometimes different, sometimes one and the same□a nature never one, but many. To be sure, after reading "Drought Year," humans will still avoid drought conditions with due caution. But a drought may not be interpreted as just another example of a hostile or indifferent nature, one that must be subdued to stay alive. It may prove difficult to speak the word "nature" at all without realizing this one word or concept represents an immensely complex situation. If this ever becomes the case, then Wright and the dingoes' cry may be remembered and the dingoes' complex and mysterious utterance may be recalled as a more suitable description for what is called "nature."

Source: Jhan Hochman, in an essay for *P'oetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Adaptations

Judith Wright Reads from Her Own Work is the title of a recording from the University of Queensland Press, 1973.

Topics for Further Study

Compare "Drought Year" to "Flood Year," another of Wright's poems from 1953. What is the central image in each? What is similar about both the poems' "characters" and setting?

Explain the meaning behind the speaker's desire to have the dead horse in the third stanza standing at the entrance of the Thirty-mile Dry.

What do the cries of the dingoes signify?

Do some geographical and historical research: attempt to find a particular locale in Australia that matches Wright's description in "Drought Year" and a drought that occurred in Australia in the late 1940s or early 1950s.

Compare and Contrast

1953: Secret British nuclear weapons tests begin at the Maralinga test range in southern Australia. Aboriginals are moved from the immediate area during the test years, but nearby, others are exposed to radiation, as are the evacuees after they begin returning in the mid-1980s. British nuclear tests are also conducted at the Emu test range and on the Monte Bello Islands, and at Christmas Island in the South Pacific.

1999: About 90 invited visitors tour the outside of Tsuruga nuclear power plant in Fukui Prefecture, Japan, just four hours after a leak occurred at its No. 2 reactor. Though the Japan Atomic Power Co. (Genden) stated there would be no danger to visitors—and its officials explained there would be no exposure to radiation—its decision to conduct a tour in the aftermath of an accident is thought controversial.

1953: A drought in far western Australia ends a plan by the Air Beef enterprise to establish itself in the Kimberley Downs.

1999: The National Farmers Federation of Australia believes that the current five-year Australian drought will cost the economy 2 billion in Australian dollars. The drought is spreading south, and without good rain before December, summer crops will be threatened and the economic situation will worsen.

What Do I Read Next?

R. McNeill Alexander's *Bones: The Unity of Form and Function* (1994) contains magnificent photos of teeth, horns, bones, and skeletons, mostly of animals. The important thing about this volume is the way it dissociates the skeleton from death and associates it with form, function, and life.

The Machine in the Garden (1964) by Leo Marx is an important milestone in the study of nature in American literature. Marx's focus is how the invasion of technology into nature was perceived in literature at the time the events were unfolding.

The Idea of Wilderness (1991) by Max Oelschlaeger is a study of humankind's relationship with nature from early totemism, through Egyptian, Greco-Roman, and Judeo-Christian supernaturalism, and finally to the rise of materialism and modernism.

The Dirty Thirties: Tales of the Nineteen Thirties during Which Occurred a Great Drought and a Lengthy Depression (1991) by William H. Hull is a book about the Dust Bowl, the aftermath of which became famous in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath.*

Further Study

Beach, Joseph Warren, The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry, New York: Macmillan, 1936.

One of the few extended studies of the meanings of nature in poetry. The volume covers Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Goethe, Carlyle, Emerson, Whitman, Arnold, Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, Meredith, Hardy, Jeffers, and Eliot. The book is an invaluable source for reading about representations of nature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Darwin, Charles, The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or The Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life, New York: Modern Library, 1974. A crucial text, containing one of the modern world's most indispensable concepts: natural selection. Darwin here helps readers to understand the workings of the natural world.

Ellmann, Richard and Robert O'Clair, The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, New York: W. W. Norton, 1988. From the verse of Walt Whitman to Cathy Song, this anthology features the best of modern poetry in English. Includes poetry by Australian poets like A. D. Hope and Wright.

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Oxford University Press, 1956.

The work includes an introduction written by Wright and spans a period of time from Charles Harpur (1813-1868) to Ray Mathew (1929-), and includes 72 poems. Wright includes seven of her own poems, but "Drought Year" is not one of them.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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