The Exhibit Study Guide

The Exhibit by Lisel Mueller

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Introduction

"The Exhibit" (contained in Lisel Mueller's collection *Second Language* [1986]) blends history and mythology to express the lingering grief and denial that still haunt an elderly man who survived being a prisoner of war. Using the unicorn metaphor, the poet shows how the horrible *public* event of world war has a lasting detrimental effect on *private* life and how our present lives are determined and shaped by the past. Mueller often writes autobiographical poems which include members of her family, and "The Exhibit" is about an uncle living in East Germany many years after the world wars of the twentieth century. The poem does not specify whether the uncle was a prisoner during the first or second world war, but his age could well place him in WWI. We know, however, that Lisel Mueller's own life was directly affected by WWII and that many of her poems stem from the events of the Holocaust. Regardless of which world war is the reference here, the meaning is the same□war takes its toll not only on the body, but on the mind, leaving decades of appalling memories for survivors and often causing them to turn to imagination and myth for comfort.

"The Exhibit" implies the atrocities of war without ever mentioning particular acts. Mueller is able to convey the horrors of conflict essentially by talking about its opposite. As a symbol of both strength and gentleness, the unicorn exemplifies the world as it *should* be. By highlighting the mythical creature's virtuous behavior and its undeniable purity, the poet actually signifies everything that the real world is not.

Author Biography

Lisel Mueller was born in 1924 in Hamburg, Germany, and moved to the United States with her parents in 1939. Both parents were teachers, and her father was a political dissident as well. Escaping Nazi Germany, he settled his family in Evans-ville, Indiana, where Lisel quickly learned to speak English, earning American citizenship six years later. As an extremely bright student, she spent only one year in an American high school before attending the University ofEvansville, graduating in 1944 at the age of twenty.

Although she dabbled in some adolescent poetry while in school, Lisel did not begin to write serious poetry until after the death of her mother in 1953. At that time, she began a serf-taught course of study, including both traditional forms and free verse, eventually settling into her own simple, unadorned poetic style. Determined to combine her love of the creative arts with a "normal" life, she also married, had children, and found employment over the years as a social worker, receptionist, library assistant, and freelance writer. Her first collection of poems, *Dependencies,* was published in 1965, twelve years after she began to study and write poetry. In 1977, she became an instructor in the Master of Fine Arts writing program atGod-dard College in Vermont.

Growing up in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s and eventually fleeing that country undoubtedly had an obvious and profound effect on anyone who lived through it. For writers, poets, painters and all others who turned to creative outlets, the influence of the turmoil and countless horrors is understandably evident in their work. Much of Lisel Mueller's poetry reflects her memories of and feelings toward her homeland and the friends and loved ones she left behind after escaping to the United States. "The Exhibit" is a typical, yet powerful, example of how this poet learned to blend world history with personal history and how even something as overwhelming as world war can be captured in simple words and simple style and still carry the impact of something complex and terrifying. Even though Lisel has lived in America for over sixty years, she has never lost her feeling of identity with Europeans. When she was interviewed by fellow poets William Hey en and Stan Sanvel Rubin in 1989, she admitted feeling more at home in the United States than anywhere else. She went on to say, however, that, "At the same time I am not a native; I see the culture and myself in it□with European eyes, and my poetry accommodates a bias toward historical determinism." Perhaps no other events in recorded history could make one feel more "determined" by the past than the world wars that destroyed so many lives and forever changed those who survived them. Lisel Mueller's work is a compelling portrayal of that concept.

Poem Text

My uncle in East Germany
points to the unicorn in the painting
and explains it is now extinct.
We correct him, say such a creature
never existed. He does not argue,
but we know he does not believe us.
He is certain power and gentleness
must have gone hand in hand
once. A prisoner of war
even after the war was over,
my uncle needs to believe in something
that could not be captured except by love,
whose single luminous horn
redeemed the murderous forest
and, dipped into foul water,
would turn it pure. This world,
this terrible world we live in,
is not the only possible one,
his eighty-year-old eyes insist,
dry wells that fill so easily now.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2:

The first two lines in "The Exhibit" give us the setting for the poem and confirm the obvious implication of the title. It takes place in an art museum in East Germany. While the country may not seem significant at this early point in the poem, it becomes paramount to our understanding the mindset of the uncle, who will turn out to be the central "character" in the work.

The mention of the unicorn in the painting may also seem minor in the second line, but the mythological creature will become the metaphor used as the major theme throughout the poem. Unicorns have a long history in the legends of various peoples around the world. They have appeared in assorted forms in Roman, Greek, Norse, and other mythologies, sometimes portraying the features of a small goat and sometimes of a large horse with a flowing white mane and white hooves. Regardless of the predominant physical shape the unicorn takes in the tales, one feature is common across cultures and time periods: the white spiral horn protruding upright from its forehead. Also in all legends, unicorns are emblems of purity, and stories center around their lives among virgin goddesses. Although the unicorn would fight ferociously when cornered, it could be tamed by the loving touch of a virgin. Their horns were said to offer protection against poison and could purify a contaminated stream when dipped into it. Overall, the unicorn symbolizes a beast with strength and power who can be□and most often is□very gentle.

Line 3:

The third line gives us our first glimpse into the mind of the uncle who explains to those around him that the unicorn "is now extinct." The initial reaction here may be amusement at the naive mistake made by a man who apparently believes unicorns actually existed once and are now extinct, as other real animals have become over time. By the end of the poem, however, we understand that simple naivete does not justifiably explain the uncle's notion that these creatures once lived on earth.

Lines 4-6:

In line 4, the speaker and whoever else is present correct the uncle, telling him that "such a creature / never existed." Even though he does not dispute their words, they know that "he does not believe us." At this point, we may still assume that the man is innocently ignorant of the unicorn's existence only in legends and that his belief in them does not stem from any *need ox preference.* Rather, he simply appears not to have his zoological history in order.

Lines 7-8:

Lines 7 and 8 introduce a new possibility into the uncle's thoughts and indicate that something much more than simple naivete or ignorance is going on in his mind. While the words "power and gentleness" are a direct reference to the attributes of the unicorn, the unicorn, in turn, becomes a twofold metaphor for the rest of the poem. In these two lines, it represents the manner in which a world leader or political figure should rule□with strength, but also with gentleness and kindness. This, of course, is in direct contrast to the corrupt dictatorship of Adolph Hitler in Europe during the early twentieth century. The uncle is "certain power and gentleness / must have gone hand in hand (once)" because he cannot allow himself to believe that humankind has *always* been victimized by tyrants whose strength emanates not from gentleness, but from selfishness and cruelty.

Lines 9-12:

Line 9 helps us further understand the emotional plight of the uncle: he has survived the horrors of being a prisoner of war. Line 10 signifies the lasting grip that the physical and emotional strain still has on his mind. Even though the actual fighting is over, the uncle is yet a "prisoner" of its terrible toll, and he will never emotionally escape from those grim memories. Lines 11 and 12 make up the second part of the unicorn's twofold metaphor. Here, the uncle himself is the reference because he "needs to believe in something / that could not be captured except by love." Recall that the unicorn could fight savagely when it had to, but was then calmed by the touch of a virgin. During the war, the uncle had been captured by the enemy, a source of great bitterness and pain. He needs to know that there exists a creature□if not a man□ who could remain free from persecution and not fall "victim" to anything but the love of a gentle, pure woman. The idea of "love" here, however, does not mean only the romantic affection shared between two people. Instead, it encompasses a world-love, or a general peace and friendship among masses of people and between nations.

Lines 13-16:

These lines refer to the legendary single horn of the unicorn, so brilliantly white that it appeared "luminous." It was so pure in nature that it could bring peace to any calamities in the forests, whether they were battles between men, between beasts, or between men and beasts. Lines 15 and 16 reiterate the magical power of the horn that "dipped into foul water, / would turn it pure."

Line 17:

In line 17, "this terrible world we live in" is diametrically opposed to the make-believe world of the unicorn. Here, the speaker acknowledges her own awareness of and grief

over the terrible suffering that so many people have endured (or not survived) at the hands of diabolic leaders.

Lines 18-19:

These two lines connect directly to line 17 but are presented from the perspective of the uncle again. He cannot believe that the "terrible world"□ the one he has been told is *real*□is "the only possible one." His denial, however, does not come in the form of verbal protest or in any words at all. The speaker knows that her uncle clings to the possibility of a better world only because "his eighty-year-old eyes insist." This line, of course, is the first mention of the uncle's age. We have likely assumed that he was an older man, but now we know that the grief brought on by world war has been with him for not only many years, but for *decades,* and that he will carry that sorrow to his grave.

Line 20:

The last line of the poem also refers to the un-cle's eyes and indicates simply that his tears come easily now. The word "now" seems to imply that the older he gets the more he cries. We may assume, then, that the longer he lives in "this terrible world" the more he must resign himself to accept that a world in which "power and gentleness" go "hand in hand" has never existed, and, most likely, never will.

Themes

Historical Determinism

Historical determinism is an idea implying that what has occurred in the past has a direct impact on what occurs in the present, in both personal lives and in society in general. Lisel Mueller was born in a time and place that will fill the pages of history books for decades, probably centuries, to come. World War II not only *affected* the lives of millions of people around the globe, but also helped to *shape* those lives into whatever they would become over the years. Whether that tumultuous time inspired creative outpourings or brought survivors to the brink of suicide, the fact that it altered life on earth is undeniable. The theory of historical determinism is common in Mueller's poetry. In a 1985 interview with author andMichigan State University professor Nancy Bunge, she stated, "I'm partial to history. To me a sense of what has gone on in the past is very important to one's view of the world."

"The Exhibit" is an obvious example of historical determinism. The uncle, who spent at least part of the war as a prisoner, has built a belief in a mythological "hero" of sorts in order to insulate his mind from having to accept only the harsh realities of the world he lives in. In much the same way that we build walls to protect ourselves from natural elements or enemies, the uncle has constructed a frame of thought□one that allows him to temper the cruelty he suffered by thinking about the kind, gentle world that must have existed before. The poem indicates that most of this very elderly man's life was determined by war, that he has endured decades of grief and turned to fantasy for comfort, perhaps so fervently that he now cannot separate fact from fiction. While we do not know anything about the uncle's life previous to the war, we can safely assume that he did not believe in unicorns or, more importantly, that he did not feel a *need* to.

Poetry and Politics

Not many American poets take on the task of making social statements in their poetry. Political activism may be prevalent on American streets, but in verse form it doesn't occur on a regular basis. Lisel Mueller, as a European-born American, has never shied away from putting her views on social issues, war, equal rights, and other matters of the political conscience in her work as a poet. In the 1985 interview with Nancy Bunge, she had this to say in regard to the difference that nationality seems to make in poets: "There is a problem with finding subject matter in our society, partly because there is a great bias among young writers against political writing.... That seems to me a uniquely American and English tradition of disassociating writing from what goes on in the world because it's certainly not true of European writers and it's not true of South American writers."

In "The Exhibit," Mueller uses both allusion ("... to believe in something / that could not be captured except by love") and straightforward commentary ("This world, / this terrible

world we live in") to make her point about the private horrors of a very public war. She uses the personal story of a relative to depict what so many other survivors of the war must have struggled with throughout their own lives. While it may be true that keeping historical events in mind may help prevent a repeat of the bad ones, memories also take their toll on the emotions, and this poem clearly displays the unending sorrow that is often born of political tyranny.

Myth and Reality

Myth plays a major role in "The Exhibit" in two different ways. First, it is the emotional shield that the uncle takes up to protect himself from a total resignation to the real world. As we go through the poem and learn more about his reasons for believing in unicorns, we come to understand that those reasons are quite valid. Just as children turn to their imaginations for comfort or companionship, adults, too, often use a fantasy world or a belief in something incredible in order to bring a positive aspect to an otherwise dismal world. The uncle in Mueller's poem may be only pretending to believe in mythological unicorns, but it is better for him to pretend than to give in completely to his very real memories.

The second role for myth in "The Exhibit" is that it serves as a juxtaposition to reality. For the unicorn, "power and gentleness / must have gone hand in hand," which is in direct opposition to the power and *corruption* that often go hand in hand in the real world. In this particular instance, the "power" alluded to is likely Adolph Hitler and/or any of the other Axis Power leaders during WWII. The description of the forest as "murderous" is also worth noting here. We know that the virtuous unicorn could bring peace and justice to beasts fighting in the woods, but the word "murderous" implies a human factor. Animals may kill, but only human beings commit murder, essentially a legal term. By setting myth against reality, Mueller makes a strong statement about "this terrible world we live in."

Style

When interviewer Nancy Bunge asked Lisel Mueller to comment on her style of writing, the poet had this to say: "My poetry is largely Germanic in the sense that I usually use strong, short words and not many Latinates because they sound weaker to me□conversational, essayistic." The "Latinates" that Mueller refers to are words derived from the ancient Roman and Latin languages, including those we now call the Romance languages, such as Italian, French, Portuguese, and Spanish. Words in these languages tend to be lengthier than the terse, sharper-sounding Germanic words, and, therefore, may sound more "conversational."

"The Exhibit" demonstrates Mueller's use of Germanic style in that its language is simple, yet powerful in delivering the message, and the lines are compact, fairly even in length, giving the poem the look of a short, neat rectangle on the page. There is no obvious rhyme and little alliteration (the repetition of consonant or vowel sounds, especially at the beginnings of words, such as "points" and "painting," "explains" and "extinct," or "correct" and "creature"). The poem is essentially a series of six complete sentences, the first four being rather brief, taking up only eight full lines, and the last two seeming more "poetic," spanning the remainder of the 20-line poem.

The first half of "The Exhibit" sets the scene for us, stating in simple, declarative sentences that it takes place in an East German museum where at least three people are looking at a painting of a unicorn. One of them believes the creature used to exist but the others do not, and they say so. Simple enough at this point, but in the second half of the poem we span decades, going back in time to a world war and illuminating the particular horrors of one of its prisoners. The fifth "sentence" is lengthy (beginning in line 9 with "A prisoner of war ..." and ending in line 16 with "... would turn it pure"), and the words are perhaps the most "complicated" in the poem, with "luminous," "redeemed," and "murderous." However, in lines 13 and 14, the words "luminous" and "murderous" are not only an effective near-rhyme, but also play well off one another to maintain the metaphor of a gentle, virtuous creature ("luminous" refers to the unicorn) versus the realities of mankind ("murderous"). While this metaphor is extended throughout the poem and the unicorn alluded to in a variety of instances, the final line contains the only "simple" metaphor in the poem: "dry wells" representing the uncle's eyes.

Historical Context

"The Exhibit" is contained in Lisel Mueller's *Second Language* collection, published in 1986. But regardless of the year or even the decade in which her poetry was written, much of the historical influence on it comes not from the time she was writing it, but from the earlier part of the twentieth century. In her 1989 interview with Rubin and Heyen, she stated that, "There's no way anymore for the individual to escape from history, the public life we all share. Being European born, I felt this very strongly. That is the story of my parents, who were born shortly before World War I, and their whole life was determined by history. Everything was imposed on them from the outside because the twentieth century in Germany was catastrophic."

Although Mueller left Germany in 1939, she lived there long enough to experience Adolph Hitler's rise to chancellor of the country, his creation of the Third Reich, the elimination of all political parties other than National Socialism, and the opening of the first concentration camp at Dachau. In the year she and her family fled their homeland, Hitler invaded Poland, and France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. At fifteen, she was very aware of the social and political atrocities taking place around her, and she witnessed the pain and stress inflicted on citizens and soldiers alike, as well as on her own loved ones.

By the time "The Exhibit" was published in the 1980s, Lisel Mueller had been a naturalized American for over 40 years. No industrial nation, however, is isolated from events happening around the world. Even as a citizen of the United States, the poet experienced the strain of social unrest in the 1960s, the civil rights movement, the war in Vietnam, and the Cold War, which spanned decades before coming to a symbolic end with the crumbling of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The turbulent times of the 1960s and 1970s had a profound effect on Mueller herself, and, subsequently, on the work she produced afterwards. In her 1985 interview with Nancy Bunge, she commented on her life during the years of the Vietnam War: "Those were bad years for me, not in terms of my private life, but in terms of being involved in the shame and guilt and wrongness of this country.... I took it all very personally, and perhaps the history of Nazi Germany in the back of my mind made me feel involved with it."

Obviously, what is in the *back of one's mind* plays a significant role in "The Exhibit." The horrors associated with war and with being a prisoner of war are constantly in the back of the uncle's mind. He portrays a classic example of "post-traumatic stress syndrome" (PTSS), a term referring to a cluster of symptoms experienced by survivors of especially traumatic events in their lives. According to the "Sleep Disorders: Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome" Web site, PTSS derived from an earlier attempt to describe the effects of war upon war survivors in the twentieth century. "Shell shock" and "battle fatigue" were previous terms that psychologists used to describe the common symptoms, including recurring nightmares, hypersensitivity, and intrusive thoughts, feelings, and memories. While there is no direct mention of the uncle having nightmares, the implication is there, and the memories of his life during the war frequently intrude upon his mind. His heightened sensitivity is evidenced in the last line which tells us that his eyes are "dry

wells that fill so easily now." He is so sensitive to the "terrible world" that he has invented a make-believe one in which unicorns once ruled with kindness and gentleness, and he insists that this mythological land and time must be "possible."

Critical Overview

Lisel Mueller did not publish her first book of poems until she was 41 years old. The first collection, *Dependencies,* was well-received by critics, although Mueller herself later claimed the poems in it were too decorative and metaphorical. Her second book showed more evidence of the brief, sharp Germanic style she would become both comfortable with and known for. This collection, *The Private Life* (1976), was a Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy ofAmerican Poets. Four years later, she published *The Need to Hold Still,* which was awarded the American Book Award for Poetry in 1981.

During the 1980s, Mueller was also noted for her work in translating the work of German poet Marie Luise Kaschnitz and of German novelist W. Anna Migutsch. These translations forced Mueller into looking very closely at how her proficiency in two languages affected her choice of words in her own writing. *Second Language* (in which "The Exhibit" first appeared) was a direct result of that examination, and this book was recognized for its particular focus on the blending of public and private lives and the interconnectedness of history and present-day life. It presents very complicated subjects in her typical clear, precise language that appeals to poetry "experts" and novices alike. Her ability to evoke emotion and paint vivid pictures with plain, simple language (whether English or German) helped make *Second Language* one of her most widely read collections.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Adrian Blevins, a poet and essayist who has taught at Hollins University, Sweet Briar College, and in the Virginia Community College System, is the author of The Man Who Went Out for Cigarettes, *a chapbook of poems, and has published poems, stories, and essays in many magazines, journals, and anthologies. In the following essay, Blevins argues that Lisel Mueller's lyric poem "The Exhibit" is more complex than it may first appear to be.*

After a single reading, Lisel Mueller's "The Exhibit" seems to contest, out of its own apparent simplicity, any real need for comment. What useful remark can be made about a straight-forward account of a poet's memory of a small disagreement with her uncle, or about the portrait of an old man whose war experience has made him either unable or unwilling to recognize the difference between an extinct animal and a mythological one? Even Mueller's language in "The Exhibit" is economical, or written in what American poet and critic Alice Fulton, in review of Mueller's *Second Language,* calls "the plain style"□a language nearly lacking in the musical devices that make most poetry full and sensual and audacious enough to bind. Yet one of "The Exhibits'" glories is that it only seems simple. Fulton says:

... reading Lisel Mueller ... is a bit like gazing at a lake or a tree. At first you think nothing new here: another wave, another leaf. But if you bring your full attention to bear, you're amazed at the implication and activity of an apparently simple surface.

All literature, because it exists both in the moment the reader encounters it and in another one the writer recalls, imagines, pretends, or craves, commits a miracle: a semantic violation of the laws governing the nature of time. But many lyric poems, because they forsake the world's abundance by narrowing their focus into a single instance or theme, are especially able to heighten or enrich our perceptions of even the simplest of experiences. Many lyric poems can be likened to still-life paintings: because there's no competing landscape in a painting of a bowl of apples (let's say), we are often able to see the fruit better□to witness it glisten and shine or resemble a bruise or a face. Mueller's talent and proclivity for the lyric has made her a master of this sort of poetic still-life. *Second Language,* the book from which we take "The Exhibit," is full of poems much like it□poems in which small memories and observations become more conceptional meditations on topics as wide-ranging as the experience of exile, the cost and weight of experience, and the imagination's power to redeem and even heal us.

On the most basic level, "The Exhibit" describes the speaker's memory of a conversation with her uncle. The speaker, her uncle, and an unnamed companion are in East Germany looking at a painting of a unicorn that is hanging in what we assume, because of the poem's title, to be an art museum. The poem's tension is revealed when the speaker tells us that her uncle says the unicorn in the painting is "now extinct." Although the speaker tells her uncle that "such a creature never existed," she says she knows "he does not believe [her]." The poem advances on the axis of this conflict between what the speaker knows to be true and what her uncle thinks ought to be true,

which in turn leads the speaker to realize that her uncle "needs to believe in something / that could not be captured except by love." The poem's poignancy comes from the speaker's empathy, which rises out of her recognition that her uncle, "a prisoner of war / even after the war was over," chooses to believe that the unicorn in the painting is real because he needs to believe that "this world, / this terrible world we live in, / is not the only possible one." Thus the poem's most basic argument that there is, at least in the mind of an old man, more than one world reinforces the duality that lyric poems themselves actualize. Although this is not precisely an example of organic form (this term describes a poem whose technique seems to mimic and enhance its own topic), it does reveal a complexity in the poem that is not immediately obvious, suggesting even on this most rhetorical level that there's more to "The Exhibit" than we first realize.

It also seems important, if not altogether serendipitous, that the speaker and her uncle are looking at a unicorn, rather than a dragon or some other mythological creature. In Western literature unicorns symbolize virtues innocent people (children, victims of war) embody. They can only be caught and tamed by young, unmarried girls. The uncle's belief that unicorns are real suggests that he longs for the kind of innocence they symbolize, while his belief that unicorns are extinct suggests that the world has destroyed or even murdered this virtue. The contrast Mueller establishes between the uncle's beliefs and what we know about him that he's eighty years old and "a prisoner of war / even after the war was over" presents the idea that experience and the knowledge that accompanies it are often very costly commodities, not only to the people of the world, but also to the world itself.

This theme is reinforced in several ways. First there's the closing image of the uncle's eyes, which the speaker calls "dry wells that fill so easily now." This image likens the uncle to a child, and children are, of course, the ultimate symbols of innocence and purity. The poet's repetition of the word "world" in the lines "this world, / this terrible world we live in" mimics both the sound and repetition of the word "war" earlier in the poem, placing emphasis on the unfortunate truth the old man's belief in unicorns is meant to challenge. Thus we can see a duality, or another complexity, at work in Mueller's poem: first, there's the real world, which is so "terrible" it contains the "murderous forest," and the "foul water," and, second, there's the imagined, fantastic, or mythological world in which a unicorn's "single luminous horn" can "[redeem] the murderous forest." These two realities sit side by side for most of the duration of "The Exhibit." One of the questions we might ask ourselves, then, is which world the speaker of this poem might prefer. Perhaps a look at Mueller's technique will tell us.

Mueller risks sentimentality at almost every turn in "The Exhibit." Her diction is dangerously abstract and conceptual (she uses "power," "gentleness," "love," and "pure" in what by any standard is a very short poem) and her rhetorical method the use of the unicorn as a central figure is both overtly symbolic and potentially trite. But the gradual movement of the poem downward toward the more archetypal setting of the forest and the unicorn's "luminous horn" within it saves the poem, if just barely, from sentimentality. The movement, or progression, of "The Exhibit" into this central image in which the unicorn's horn "redeemed the murderous forest / and, dipped into the foul water, / would then turn it pure ..." redeems by both the increasing speed of the lines

and the use of more concrete images the power and importance of the mythological forest, which has been set up in contrast to the civilized, and more plain, landscape of the art museum. That Mueller uses a more discursive, prosaic, or matter-of-fact line in her description of her conversation with her uncle and then shifts into more imagistic and rhythmic lines describing the forest and the unicorn sets up a dichotomy that pitches itself, lyrically, in favor of the imagined world.

In "The Image as a Form of Intelligence," American poet and critic Robert Bly argues that the image is a poetic device that can "fill the gap between ourselves and nature." He says: "a human being can reach out with his left hand to the world of human intelligence and with his right hand to the natural world, and touch both at the same time." The speaker of "The Exhibit" and her uncle can be said to represent the world of human intelligence on the one hand and the natural or mythological world on the other. But this is not to suggest that the speaker of "The Exhibit" embraces the world of logic and reason. It is important to note that the speaker of this poem does not really argue with her uncle; she not only allows him to believe in the extinct unicorn, but, by way of a series of realizations and observations about the way he suffered in the war, understands why he must. "The Exhibit" closes on a note of extreme empathy. The last line is one of the few images in the poem, and for this reason brings as much attention to itself as do the earlier images of forest and unicorn horn. The drawn-out affect of the closing anapest, especially in contrast to the energy of the iambs of "dry wells that fill"□produces a sound like a sigh of resignation. The musicality and physicality of this closing line makes it especially emotive, and thus reinforces the speaker's realization that the worlds we imagine (and even invent) for ourselves are not only as important as the real world we find ourselves living in, but are perhaps as well metaphorical necessities, rising as they do from the kind of imaginative thinking that would redeem us from the cost and weight of living in a world so terrible it could produce, among other horrors, the Holocaust.

American poet and critic Dick Allen, in a 1977 discussion of Mueller's third book, *A Private Life,* argues in his conclusion to an overall complementary review that "the only thing I miss is ... the drive toward the core, the steady deepening." This seems a reasonable enough request, and one Lisel Mueller seems to have heard. As our look at "The Exhibit" has shown, often there is more to Mueller's minimalist poems than we first might think. Though the ocean may at first look like a desert□all flat and steady and fixed□we know it isn't one, but rather the commonplace surface of deep body of water within which dwells a whole second universe. It is thus like many of the best lyric poems□a creation whose plenty we need only dive in for.

Source: Adrian Blevins, in an essay *for Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Pamela Steed Hill has had poems published in close to a hundred journals and is the author of In Praise of Motels, *a collection of poems published byBlair Mountain Press. She is an associate editor for* University Communications *at TheOhio State University. In the following essay, Steed Hill discusses the idea that the detrimental effects of war remain with survivors long after the battles have ended, often causing them to take comfort in a world of make-believe.*

For individuals who have never been directly touched by war or by any other catastrophic event, the idea of "historical determinism" may seem farfetched. Many of us want to believe that we have complete control over who we are and why we have certain feelings or behave in particular ways. But there are those whose lives have been greatly altered by experiences with the horrors of war, especially the world wars that affected millions of human beings all over the globe during the first half of the twentieth century. Born in Germany in 1924. Lisel Mueller was an eyewitness to the atrocities of political tyranny and the persecution of select groups of people. She would physically escape the Second World War at the age of fifteen when she and her family fled to the United States. She would never, however, be emotionally free from the suffering she left behind and the loved ones who stayed to endure it.

"The Exhibit" explores the effects that war and that being a prisoner of warhas had on the mind and spirit of an elderly man, identified in the poem as Mueller's uncle who lives in East Germany. The setting for the poem is an art museum, and, specifically, it takes place in front of a painting of a unicorn. This serene, pleasant, and most likely quiet atmosphere is in sharp contrast to the environment revealed later in the poem through the use of metaphor and allusion. Mueller presents a striking juxtaposition of emotions by taking us into the mind of the uncle who may appear to be on a casual outing with family members, but who is still haunted by the grief and pain of events that took place many decades earlier.

The poem begins innocently enough, with the uncle explaining to his listeners that the unicorn "is now extinct." When he is told that unicorns cannot be extinct because they never lived in the first place, he does not argue the point, but neither does he believe it. In this opening third of "The Exhibit" we may assume the uncle is simply naive in thinking that the mythological creaturetypically presented as a white horse with a long white mane and a white spiral horn protruding from the front of its foreheadactually roamed the earth at one time. As the poem develops, however, we learn that his belief in a being that represents both "power and gentleness" is actually a kind of protection against having to accept the world as it really is. More importantly, his imagination is a shield against the memories of war and of being a prisoner of war. Mueller expresses the lingering pain of the uncle's experience in describing him as "A prisoner of war / even after the war was over."

What life was like for the uncle prior to the conflict we don't know. He was presumably a young man when it started, and Mueller focuses her poem on how the later decades of

his life were shaped by the war years. He probably did not believe in unicorns when he was younger, and, of course, the irony here is that childish naivete would not have been uncommon for him then. But the experience of world war caused his emotions to do an about-face, so to speak, luring him into the comfort of fantasy and make-believe as he grew older. A very revealing point in the poem is in lines 11 and 12, which tell us that the uncle "... needs to believe in something / that could not be captured except by love." The key word here is "needs." It's not that the war veteran simply believes in something or necessarily wants to, but that he essentially requires it. He must believe in a world other than the real one in order not to be swallowed up by the memories of how horrible it all can be.

This poem speaks very strongly on the terrible human cost of war. Mueller doesn't address the number of actual deaths that occurred during the world wars, but, instead, focuses on the toll they took on the mind. This is a common theme in her poetry, and it often pairs with the corresponding idea of historical determinism. What an individual witnesses or experiences on a grand scale has a direct impact on the smaller, personal scale. This poet's own frame of reference stems from WWII in particular, but the sentiments she presents in poetic form would apply to all national or global conflicts. When she was interviewed by author and professor Nancy Bunge in 1985, Mueller commented on her belief in the vital role that history plays in our lives, stating that "what has gone on in the past is very important to one's view of the world." She also stated that during the Vietnam War, she felt personally the "shame and guilt and wrongness" of America in that conflict. Although she had been a naturalized citizen of the United States for over twenty years at that point, she still attributed some of her outrage to having the "history of Nazi Germany in the back of my mind."

That same history, of course, is what is on the uncle's mind in "The Exhibit." It has caused him to turn to a belief in the unicorn because the legends surrounding this gallant mythological creature portray it as both strong and gentle, much unlike the human leaders that the uncle suffered under who were strong and tyrannical. When he was captured during the war (we don't know exactly by whom), he had yet another burden to bear and was unfortunate enough to see war from a different cruel perspective□that of a prisoner. The unicorn became an appealing "hero" to the uncle because it could not be captured except by the tender touch of a virgin woman, or, in other words, by love. This he sees as a "good" kind of captivity, directly opposed to being taken by an enemy. Lines 13-16 of the poem rely on allusion to the typical characteristics of the unicorn and on the metaphor in reference to the real world as a "murderous forest" and as "foul water." Legend tells us that the unicorn could be a vicious fighter, but it was supposedly a "just" fighter, and its enemies were truly evil. Therefore, its "single luminous horn/ redeemed the murderous forest / and, dipped into foul water, / would turn it pure." During the Nazi years in Germany, the atmosphere was surely "murderous" and "foul," and the uncle needed to believe in something that could bring about redemption and purity for the human race.

In the next-to-last line of "The Exhibit," we learn that the uncle is eighty years old. While we may have assumed he was an elderly man, it is important to know just how elderly because it helps to amplify the long-term effects of history. We are not told the year in

which his captors actually released him, but for decades he has been a "psychological" prisoner of war. He is apparently still prone to tears of grief since Mueller describes his eyes as "dry wells that fill so easily now." But this sentimentality cannot be dismissed as the emotional tendencies of the aged because it is derived from a very real and a very distressing source.

Perhaps the most provocative question that remains at the end of the poem is whether the uncle really believes that unicorns once existed and that their ability to be both powerful and gentle was true. There is evidence for both a yes and a no answer, though each is subtle and ultimately inconclusive. The fact that the uncle brings up the subject in the first place indicates that he does believe in the creatures. If he realized his feelings were based solely on imagination and that revealing them would only bring teasing from his family, if not ridicule, it seems unlikely that he would confess to his fantasy world while touring a museum. The sixth line supports the notion that his belief in unicorns is real because the speaker acknowledges that "he does not believe us"□this in regard to his being told the creatures never existed. But one word near the end of the poem throws this hypothesis into doubt.

In line 19, the word "insist" implies a forced argument, one that is built on a desperate attempt to deny what one simply does not want to accept. In this case, the uncle cannot accept that "this terrible world we live in" is the "only possible one." The last four lines of the poem paint a picture of the old man that is very vivid. He stands in front of a painting that contains an image he has come to consider sacred□that of the beloved unicorn. While pondering the rejection of its existence by his family members and remembering the atrocities of the "terrible world," he begins to cry, or, at least, his eyes fill with tears. Set within this emotional scene, the uncle is like a child who is old enough to know there is no Santa Claus, but who is not ready to accept the loss of the comfort of believing in him. "Insist" here connotes urgency and need, but not necessarily honest conviction. The impression is that the overwhelming realization that the real world□ the terrible one□truly is the only possible one is more than the uncle can take. His response is simply to insist, silently, that it isn't true.

Much of this poem's strength lies in its portrayal of complex human emotions and catastrophic events in simple, easy-to-understand language. Often, the most horrific subjects are only cheapened by an attempt to dramatize or elaborate on their shocking aspects. As in "The Exhibit," however, a matter-of-fact, unadorned manner of relating a story can produce an even more chilling impression than if the "blood and guts" were spelled out in gruesome detail. The uncle does not scream his suffering throughout the galleries of the museum, and it is safe to assume that he has kept his pain to himself for his entire adult life. In the same way, the poem does not shriek its purpose or themes at the reader. Instead, it quietly and methodically takes us into the weary mind of a war veteran who did indeed survive the Holocaust, but who will always be its victim.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Adaptations

In 1979, Lisel Mueller recorded a 60-minute tape of eleven poems, with an introduction by Tom Mandel. Poet/novelist Clarence Major joins Mueller as a co-reader on some poems. This tape is difficult to find, but may be back-ordered from some online booksellers, such as amazon.com.

In 1995, the Illinois Association of Teachers of English (IATE) recorded an interview with Lisel Mueller. It is available by contacting: IATE,English Building, 608 South Wright Street, Urbana, IL 61801.

Topics for Further Study

Select a member of your family whom you believe has been changed in some way by an event in history, either a worldwide, national, or local occurrence. Write an essay on how this individual's mind-set or personality has been partly shaped by the event.

If you were going to believe in a mythological creature or person, which one would it be and why? Explain the reasons for your choice in an essay.

Write two brief poems on the same topic, using two different styles. For one poem, use a "Germanic" style and for the other, use language that is more indicative of a "Latinate" style. Which one do you prefer and why?

Andersonville Village in southwest Georgia is the sight of a notorious Confederate prison used during the Civil War. After researching the topic, write an essay on what conditions at the prison led to the deaths of nearly 13,000 Union soldiers.

Compare and Contrast

1982: The Vietnam War Memorial, designed by Maya Lin, is dedicated in Washington D.C.

1982: Helmut Kohl becomes chancellor of West Germany. Over the following decade he would be a major factor in the country's unification with East Germany.

1987: Nazi leader Klaus Barbie is convicted of World War II crimes.

1991: The Persian Gulf War begins as the United States and its allies drop bombs on Iraq and Kuwait.

1993: The movie *Schindler's List,* centering on the real life events of a German man who helped hide Jews during the Holocaust, wins the Oscar for Best Picture, and theHolocaustMemorial Museum is dedicated in Washington D.C.

1995: U.S. Army veteran Timothy McVeigh is arrested for the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City. The blast killed 169 people and remains the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil.

What Do I Read Next?

Though part of Lisel Mueller's *Learning to Play by Ear* contains poems from her first collection, *Dependencies,* it also includes essays and interviews not found anywhere else. In this book, she discusses everything from syntax and diction to memory and the writing life.

Driven into Paradise: The Musical Migration from Nazi Germany to the United States (1999) is a collection of essays concerning a result of Nazi Germany that is not often considered. Editors Reinhold Brinkmann and Christoph Wolff have gathered writings by and about the forced migration of German musicians and the flood of artists and intellectuals who entered the United States from 1933 to 1944. The essays reveal the impoverishment of Germany that turned into enrichment for America.

Written by a prisoner of war, Sidney Stewart's *Give Us This Day* was first published in 1957. Stewart was the only survivor among a group of American soldiers captured by the Japanese during WWII, and his story is told in a plain narrative that is both fascinating and revealing of the strength of the human spirit.

Paul Celan was one of the most important poets to come out of Nazi Germany only to commit suicide decades later in 1970. John Fel-stiner's *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (1995) is the first critical biography of the poet and highlights the connection between Celan's own experiences and his poetry. Celan's work attempted to expose the truth in a world that wanted to silence him.

Roy Wilkinson's *Are You a Unicorn? The Meaning and Mission of Unicorns* (1998, 2nd edition) explores the possibility that some human beings are actually "unicorns" trapped in a world of violence and selfishness. Written on an adult level, the author poses provocative questions about certain people who exhibit the characteristics of the mythological creatures and may well be unicorns on earth.

James Randi is noted for his books and lectures exposing fraud in so-called paranormal events□ everything from ESP to haunted houses to a belief in unicorns. *Flim Flam! Psychics, ESP, Unicorns, and Other Delusions* (1998) is a fun and interesting look at a wide range of both off-the-wall and widely accepted beliefs, as told by one who thinks it's all nonsense.

Further Study

Carlson, Lewis H., *We Were Each Other's Prisoners: An Oral History of World War II American and German Prisoners of War,* New York: Basic Books, 1997.

Based on over 150 interviews with prisoners of war during WWII, this book tells the stories of the survivors in their own words. It includes the tale of an anti-Nazi German soldier who refused to fight for Hitler and another prisoner who escaped from his captors three times.

Mueller, Lisel, *Alive Together,* Baton Rouge: Louisiana

State University Press, 1996.

This is a collection of Mueller's new and selected poems, including some of those contained in *Second Language* and her four other books. It compiles 35 years worth of her best work and, as the title suggests, its theme is the miracle of human love, despite all odds.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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