The Eagle Study Guide

The Eagle by Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

The Eagle Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Poem Text....5

Plot Summary....6

Themes....9

Style....11

Historical Context....12

Critical Overview....14

Criticism....15

Critical Essay #1....16

Critical Essay #2....20

Adaptations....24

Topics for Further Study....25

What Do I Read Next?....26

Further Study....27

Bibliography....28

Copyright Information....29

Introduction

"The Eagle: A Fragment" was first published in 1851, when it was added to the seventh edition of Tennyson's *Poems,* which had itself been published first in 1842. As with the best of the poet's works, this short poem displays a strong musical sense; the words chosen, such as "crag," "azure," and "thunderbolt" not only fit the meaning of the poem but also fit the slow musical sensibility which gives the poem its thoughtful, almost worshipful, tone.

Since the title of the poem identifies it as "a fragment," the reader may be led to wonder if it represents a completed work and a completed idea. This uncertainty is enhanced by the question of what actually happens to the eagle at the end of the poem: does he become ill, somehow lose his ability to fly, and tumble helplessly into the sea, or is the poet using the term "he falls" figuratively, to portray the quick action of a powerful bird diving to scoop up its prey? The poem is too short, and offers too little background for us to tell if the sudden reversal in the last line is meant to be ironic (the frailty of the mighty eagle) or if it continues to indicate the eagle's harmony with his surroundings, so that his dive is phrased in terms of gravity. Because neither explanation seems more likely than the other, and we can assume that a powerful poet like Tennyson could have leaned his audience toward one interpretation if he had wanted to, it is fair to say that "The Eagle: A Fragment" is purposely constructed so that both interpretations apply. Tennyson wants us to see the eagle as both a swift predator and a powerful bird who is none the- less susceptible to defeat by other forces (quite possibly human).

Author Biography

Tennyson was born in 1809 in Somersby,Lincolnshire. The fourth of twelve children, he was the son of a clergyman who maintained his office grudgingly after his younger brother had been named heir to their father's wealthy estate. According to biographers, Tennyson's father, a man of violent temper, responded to his virtual disinheritance by indulging in drugs and alcohol. Each of the Tennyson children later suffered through some period of drug addiction or mental and physical illness, prompting the family's grim speculation on the "black blood" of the Tennysons. Biographers surmise that the general melancholy expressed in much of Tennyson's verse is rooted in the unhappy environment at Somersby. He died in 1892.

Poem Text

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;

Close to the sun in lonely lands,

Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls:

He watches from his mountain walls,

And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Plot Summary

Line 1:

The words "clasps," "crag," and "crooked" associate the eagle with age: "craggy," for instance, is still used to describe a lined, age-weathered face. The hard "c" sound that begins each of these words also establishes a hard, sharp tenor to this poem's tone that fits in with the idea of the eagle's similarly hard, sharp life. The repetition of first sounds is called alliteration, and Tennyson uses it in this short "fragment" to convey a sense of the eagle's situation.

If there is any question in the reader's mind about why we should care to read about the habits of an eagle in the wild, Tennyson settles it at the end of the line, where he uses the poetic technique of personification in talking about the eagle's "hands." When Tennyson makes the association of the eagle's claws with human hands, he lets us know that the story of the eagle is not just a study of an animal in its natural environment, but that, symbolically, he is telling us about human beings. Because of the implications of the descriptions mentioned above, we can assume that the eagle represents an elderly person.

Line 2:

The idea that is presented to the reader in the phrase "close to the sun" could be expressed more directly, but in using these words Tennyson accomplishes two goals. First, by bringing the sun in to describe how high up in the air the eagle is, he uses hyperbole, or exaggeration, to associate the eagle with a sense of grand majesty. Tennyson lived during the Enlightenment, a time when scientific curiosity and learning were greatly valued, and as an educated man he would not have believed that an eagle's altitude could reach anywhere near the sun's, but this association makes the eagle seem, like the sun, more powerful than anything of this earth. Placing the eagle near the sun also alludes to the myth of Icarus. An allusion is a reference to something else, specifically another literary work, so that readers can use knowledge of that other work to sharpen their understanding. In Greek mythology, Icarus and his father Daedalus escaped from imprisonment on the Isle of Crete by making wings out of wax and feathers and flying away, but Icarus became too ambitious and flew close to the sun; the wax melted, and Icarus fell into the sea and drowned. By placing the winged eagle near the sun, Tennyson seems to be implying that it may be too confident of its own ability, just as Icarus was. This connection is made complete in the last line of the poem, when the eagle falls.

Line 3:

The image in this line points backward, to the ancient notion that the sky consisted of a series of spheres that circled the earth, as well as forward to modern science's

understanding of the earth's atmosphere. The "azure sphere" brings to mind not just a blue (azure) sky reaching from horizon to horizon; it also alludes to a sense of confinement. Being "ringed" traps the eagle, keeps him surrounded, so that, in spite of what line 2 says about the eagle being close to the sun, he is still bound to this earth. If we take into account the fact that this poem, by using words to describe the eagle that are usually used for humans, makes a connection between eagle and human lives, we can assume that Tennyson is telling us something about the human condition in the way the eagle has the power to approach the sun but is held down by the earth. The idea of the majesty of the intellect or spirit being weighed down by the body's weakness is a common idea in Tennyson's works.

Line 3 provides a perspective from which the poem is being told. If the eagle were being viewed from above, the background that "rings" him would not be the blue sky but the ground. There is not much revealed about the speaker of the poem, but this detail divulges that the speaker, and by association the reader, "looks up" to the eagle.

Line 4:

The two strongest words used to describe the sea, "wrinkled" and "crawls," reflect the images of old age that were associated with the eagle in line 1. Unlike the eagle, though, the sea is not being shown as proud and strong in its old age, but as decrepit□crawling like a drunkard. Here, Tennyson may be implying that the things of the earth are more vulnerable, more susceptible to decay, than things of the sky like the eagle. Since the perspective in this line is obviously the eagle's (the sea would only look "wrinkled" from a great height), the poem seems to be implying that it is the eagle, and not necessarily the speaker of the poem, who views the sea as weak. This fits with the myth of Icarus whose thoughts of his own power and importance led him further and further away from the earth.

Line 5:

The dominant image in this line is one of a stone barrier: "mountain walls." Although nesting and perching on the sides of mountains could be seen as simply an accurate description of eagle behavior, a reader has to wonder why Tennyson took the time and space to mention it in this short poem, when so many other eagle behaviors have been left out. The most apparent explanation would be that the poet not only wants to give a fact about eagles' lifestyles, but that he also wants to mention "walls" for the symbolic associations it brings. The implication is that there is something restraining the eagle, setting a limit to his abilities, the way a stone wall would. Earlier lines indicate a contrast between the glory of flight, height, and the sun and the weakness of the earth, the sea and the eagle's own body: if there is something holding him back, it is that the eagle, although he can fly, is still a creature of earth.

Line 5 also uses a strangely passive verb to describe the eagle's action. "He watches." The reader, naturally, must wonder what he is watching, since watching would have to

be focused on a specific thing. What do eagles watch? It is this verb that justifies interpreting the "fall" in the last line as a dive into the sea to pluck a fish from the water, because eagles and animals in general watch mainly for food. In this interpretation the eagle is mighty and supreme through to the end, and is so much a part of the natural world that attacking his prey is described as an act of gravity.

Line 6:

Although line 5 raised a question about what was going through the eagle's mind, what he was watching, just before he fell, the most common interpretation of line 6 is that the eagle really did fall unintentionally, the victim of illness or decay. This is a sudden, shocking end for the strong and proud creature portrayed in the first five lines, but it is not unanticipated in the rest of the poem. Line 2, for instance, alludes to the myth of Icarus, who ended up falling into the sea and drowning. Line 5 ends with a mention of "walls," which increases the reader's awareness of this strong creature's limitations. If Tennyson actually did structure this poem around reversing the reader's expectations, we can see why he left it "a fragment," rather than expanding it: the balance between the first five lines and the sixth would have to be exact. If the eagle, the proud bird, can drop dead off of the face of a mountain, Tennyson seems to be warning us that people, no matter what heights they reach, can fall in the end.

Themes

Freedom

The bird soaring in the sky has always been used as an example of freedom from the bonds of gravity, which anchors plants, people, and most animals to the earth. The eagle in this poem is pictured "close to the sun"—another symbol of highflying freedom that is not controlled by the limitations of the earth's atmosphere. This area of the sky, just inside of and barely contained by the "azure world" of outer space, is what is meant by "lonely lands." Loneliness implies detachment or a lack of responsibility to any other thing, while referring to the eagle's perch as a different land once more enforces the idea that it is free of the rules and constraints that govern the lands of the earth. He is not, however, completely detached: as the poem's first words put it, the eagle "clasps" onto the side of a mountain. This verb usage implies a sense of desperation. In a poem this short, using so few words, the words that the author chooses to include must be chosen with precision for their broadest implications. Tennyson's use of the word "wall" suggests more than the simple description of the side of a mountain and can be taken as a reminder of the limitations that a wall usually implies. The eagle is free to roam the skies but is also attached to a stone wall. It hangs on tightly to the wall instead of soaring freely, and when it lets go of its grasp, it does not move freely but falls to earth like a rock. Even if the action at the end is not just the eagle succumbing to gravity but is in fact a dive toward a prey that it has seen, the thunderbolt-like speed of its descent still implies a compulsion beyond its free will.

Flesh versus Spirit

Readers are not told anything directly about the eagle's spirit in this poem. It is written from the point of view of an observer down on the ground, who sees the bird high above, with the sky as a backdrop. The eagle's spirit is implied in the words that were chosen by Tennyson. There is strength implied by the hard *k* sounds repeated, early on, in the words "clasps," "crag," and "crooked." Other words stir up emotional associations of power in the reader because they are commonly used to describe powerful things. These words, used for their connotative effect, include "clasps," "sun," "ringed," "stands," "mountain," and especially "thunderbolt." All of these images of strength are associated with the eagle, implying that he has a powerful spirit. Readers get a sense that this is a noble creature that reigns over the world beneath him.

On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence that this eagle is old, that its body is weak. In the first line, its claws are called "crooked hands"— this image brings to mind the look of a bird's claws, but it also implies an old, arthritic human. "Wrinkled" is not used to describe the bird but refers instead to the rippling waves on the sea, but the very mention of age in this poem, which is so brief, reflects on the eagle. The sea is a crucial part of the bird's environment. It is wrinkled and crawling, establishing a mood of weakness in this poem.

The eagle's physical weakness is shown most emphatically in the poem's last word. Tennyson could have chosen a more forceful, proactive word if he meant to show the eagle to be as physically powerful in body as it is in spirit. To say that he "falls" implies that the bird has lost its ability to hold on or to fly. The powerful spirit that is implied by other forceful words in the poem is turned inside-out by this evidence that it is a doddering, weak, incapable, old thing that is not in control of its own body, much less its world.

Permanence

Most of the imagery used in "The Eagle" is used to show things of a lasting, geological scale absorbing the eagle into an unchanging landscape of stone and sky. The crag in line one and the mountain walls in line five are permanent fixtures that will not change within the course of centuries. The eagle's crooked hand fits into the crag in both an audible sense ("clasp" and "crag" have matching sounds) and in a visual sense. The poem's use of these images implies that the eagle is just as permanent as the stone wall. The reference to the "azure world" of the sky also implies a sense of permanence, with celestial bodies appearing in the same places overhead consistently each year regardless of what changes are taking place on the earth in the ensuing time. Even the sea, which is constantly in motion, is presented here as unchanging, because the small, always-moving waves are described as stationary wrinkles.

One more clue that subtly makes readers believe that the scene presented here is unchanging is the poem's strict rhyme scheme. There is a sense of concreteness in the fact that all of the lines are of the same length and that they all end with similar sounds. This poem is built like a block of granite, raising expectations that the same tone that has been established in the first five lines must necessarily be carried on into the last.

By showing the eagle's environment to be still and unchanging, Tennyson leads readers to view the bird as permanent, an unchanging part of an unchanging setting. In the end, though, he turns expectation on its head and exchanges the stillness for sudden, lightning-fast motion. The last line comes as a surprise because the abrupt, almost violent activity that it describes shatters the poem's stillness. This abrupt reversal of expectations reminds readers of the ever-changing nature of living things more effectively than the poem could have done had it not reversed directions.

Style

"The Eagle: A Fragment" is written in two stanzas of three lines each and utilizes the iambic-tetrameter form of meter. Iambic meter is structured in units of two syllables where the first syllable is unstressed and the second is stressed. If the stresses are identified, the first line appears as follows:

Heclasps / thecrag / withcrook / edhands;

"Tetrameter" ("tetra" meaning four) indicates that there are four iambic units, or feet, in each line. It should be noted, however, that Tennyson varies the iambic pattern in two places. In both lines 2 and 3, the first two syllables do not form an iamb (an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable), but rather a trochee, meaning that the first syllable is stressed and the second unstressed. After these first two syllables, the lines revert to iambic construction.

The rhyme scheme in the poem is *aaa bbb,* meaning that the last words in the three lines of the first stanza rhyme with one another and the same is true of the last words in the lines of the second stanza.

Another device employed by Tennyson in "The Eagle: A Fragment" is alliteration, which is the repetition of the first sounds in words. This is most noticeable in the line 1, with the repetition of the hard "c" sound: "clasps," "crag," and "crooked." "Lonely lords" in line 2 and "watches" and "walls" in line 5 also use this technique to heighten the musical sound of the poem.

Historical Context

Tennyson was appointed by Queen Victoria to be England's Poet Laureate in 1850, a year before "The Eagle" was first published, and he served in that position until his death in 1892. He is considered to be one of the most influential voices in the long period of British prosperity during Victoria's reign, which is broadly referred to as the Victorian Age.

Queen Victoria was born atKensington Palace on May 24, 1819. She ascended to the throne of England andIreland in 1837, when her uncle, William IV, died without any children. For sixty-four years she ruledGreat Britain, which was the most powerful country in the world. At first, the eighteen-year-old queen upheld liberal sentiments. The early part of the nineteenth century was still marked by liberalism, which was a belief in equality and individual rights. The height of liberalism had occurred earlier marked by the American Revolution in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789. In both cases, the old, hereditary, aristocratic order was overturned in favor of the ability of the people to govern their own affairs. Victoria's early liberalism is considered to have been influenced by a number of things, including her own youthful idealism and the world's lingering enthusiasm with liberal ideals.

The nineteenth century was a time of great social transformation, and the queen's sympathies altered as both she andEngland changed. One of the most profound influences on her thinking came when she married Albert, her first cousin, in 1840. For the next twenty years, Victoria and Albert ruledGreat Britain closely. His conservative attitude came to be hers. Albert was formal, straight-laced, and it is his prudish attitude toward public behavior that has left the Victorian Age with the reputation for being repressed about matters of social behavior.

At the same time, the Industrial Revolution was reorganizing the structure of society and raising doubts about the effectiveness of liberalism. Because mechanical efficiency was creating larger and more successful cities, there was a shift in population in Western countries (meaning, mainly, England and theAmericas) away from farms and toward cities. Machines that were powered by steam that was created by burning coal were able to turn out products at a rate many times what had been possible before. Society was redefined by such technological developments as the telegraph (1844), which made long-distance communication possible; the daguerreotype (1837), which was the first workable method of photography; and the first development of the electric lamp in 1808, which eventually led toEdison's light bulb in 1879. At the same time that these technological marvels were being introduced, though, the problems associated with the rapid growth of cities made life miserable for large masses of people.

Cities, unprepared to absorb the rapid growth that they were faced with, became crowded, squalid, dirty pockets of poverty.London, the main city of the world at that time, quadrupled in population in forty years from 598,000 in 1801 to 2.42 million in 1841. The resulting population density led to overworked and inefficient waste disposal methods, which hastened the spread of disease, particularly tuberculosis and cholera.

Early industrial methods created the dense pollution that readers are most familiar with from the novels of Charles Dickens such as *Bleak House* or *Great Expectations.* In one of Dickens' most familiar descriptions, based on an actual situation, the streetlights ofLondon had to be lit at midday because the pollution from coal-burning industries had blocked out the sun. The liberal ideal of having government run by common people gave way quickly when faced with the increasing perception of the "common people" being a grubby crowd fighting for survival among squalid conditions, living like rats among rats. The mood among the educated toward aristocrats keeping tight control of the political process coincided with Victoria's political views, as influenced by her Prince Consort, Albert.

In the second half of the century, the plight of the urban poor could not be ignored, and the government set about passing reform measures that regulated their exploitation. Work days were shortened to ten hours for women and children, health inspectors began closing down the worst boarding houses, and mission houses were opened to try to help the poor rather than just throwing them into jails. Labor organizations were formed, and they fought for better working conditions, while Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* redefined the relationship between laborers and the owners of the means of production.

After Prince Albert died in 1861, Queen Victoria never remarried but tried to stay true to his memory for the forty years that she continued to live. As the upper social classes continued to recognize and accept the "vulgar" behaviors of the lower classes, the court of the Queen became more insistent on what was considered proper behavior, leaving the Victorian era with a dual legacy of over-sentimentalization and hypocrisy. The age included the very earliest experiments in artistic photography and the rise of the impressionist movement elsewhere inEurope, but the image that the phrase Victorian Art conjures up today is an idealized, ornate style with swirls of pastel and flower petals filling in the borders of every scene. Likewise, public behavior was, in keeping with the queen's tastes, based in hypocrisy. The modern concept of polite social manners comes from the Victorian tastes regarding public behavior, and books outlining the rules of those manners defined the elements of "class" for the new aristocracy who had not been born to the upper class, but who had risen into it as the old social rules came apart and wealth became the deciding factor of one's social position.

Tennyson's death in 1892 and Victoria's death in 1901 coincided with the birth of a new century. They had both lived long and been in the public eye for decades, and were seen as relics of the past by a world that was ready for change. The Victorian manner, which developed as a response to the country's industrialization and its uneasy adjustment to the passing of the strictly hereditary social class system, was no longer practical. Attempts to hold onto the image of a gentler and politer time stopped being charming as Great Britain began losing its economic edge to other countries, especially America, and the codes of the Victorian Era became an embarrassing sign of faded greatness.

Critical Overview

Novelist Henry James once made a comment that was meant to address Tennyson's work in general, but is especially true of "The Eagle: A Fragment": "a man has always the qualities of his defects, and if Tennyson is ... a static poet, he at least represents repose and stillness and fixedness of things with a splendour that no poet has surpassed." In general, critics tend to praise Tennyson's skills more highly when he writes about inactivity than when he writes about activity, because his weakness is in describing what motivates action. Since the eagle in this poem clasps, stands, and watches, and his only motion, in the poem's last word, is passive, Tennyson avoids his weakness and shifts the focus to his stronger descriptive abilities.

In delineating a situation, Tennyson's style often implies concepts beyond the state at hand, shedding light on the interaction between humans, nature, and God. Critic Herbert F. Tucker referred to such unexplained inferences as "naked lyrical address." In his essay "Tennyson and the Measure of Doom," Tucker notes that "The Eagle" is one of several Tennyson poems that uses this technique lightly. Nonetheless, writes Tucker, in these works "Tennyson's theme and imagery gravitate toward some inevitable ground on the power of God, the drift of nature, or the obsessions of human nature."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kelly teaches creative writing at Oakton Community College and College of Lake County in Illinois. In this essay, he explores the anomalous nature of "The Eagle" among Tennyson's works of the early 1850s.

The fact that Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "The Eagle" is still studied along with the rest of his poetry is an oddity unto itself, testimony to the simple, clean package that the poem presents, to its unique power. The poem has hardly any large-scale significance in the history of literature, it just happens to be a powerful, solid piece of work. It certainly does not have the pointed mythological references, the historical significance or the biographical elements that stir modern curiosity about some of Tennyson's other works.

"The Eagle" deserves attention not for where it came from but for what it is, which is a poem that makes use of all of the tools at its disposal. It makes optimum use of poetic devices, such as the rhyming tercets, the alliteration, and the elevated language that all work to raise its natural subject to a position of nobility. At the same time, the poem is modern enough to avoid the pretense that it can give its readers a complete picture of what is going on with only this fragment. Its honesty comes from provoking readers to think about the scene described, as opposed to the sentimental manipulation that critics have accused Tennyson of stooping to at his worst.

The poem was first published in 1851, the year after Tennyson achieved the triple blessings of marrying his longtime lover, publishing an immensely popular book, and winning the Poet Laureateship of England, succeeding William Wordsworth. Most critics have considered it a period of transition in the poet's life from his humble struggle out of poverty to almost universal fame, taking the most prominent government literary position in a country that values its literary heritage. The year 1850 is considered the crease in the center of Tennyson's life and literary career, and his style took a subsequent change of direction. "The Eagle," at the division, shows signs of both his old style and his new.

The way that the poem was released does not match what might be expected of what would grow to become one of this much-studied writer's most-studied works. It was not brought out in a triumphant volume of new poetry by the new Poet Laureate but slipped into the latest edition of his *Poems,* which had first been published nine years earlier and was then on its seventh edition. It might be thought that, in a sense, Tennyson published this incomplete fragment to burn off old material that he did not intend to develop further. It certainly is a better fit for his earlier persona as a struggling artist than as his new one, in which he had the moral responsibility, as a member of the government, for recording the public mood. It seems to be an example of nothing else that occurred in Tennyson's life or in his work, but examining the works that surround it, "The Eagle" can be seen as fitting perfectly into the situation of its publication.

Tennyson was always a writer with a wide range of abilities. The 1842 collection, which has survived to be his most critically acclaimed, shows off his diversity. That book gave the world such classic Tennyson pieces as "The Lady of Shallott," a long narrative about one of the knights of Camelot (a subject he also explored in *Idylls of the King,* which was started around this time but published more than a decade later); "The Lotos-Eaters," which was also a long narrative with a mythical theme, in this case concerning sailors who travel to an enchanted land and eat lotus flowers, which make them too lethargic and content to return to their homes any more; and "Break, break, break," a short piece of four quatrains that calls upon the sea to act out the speaker's violent anguish by smashing against the shore. The first two of these were completely revamped versions of poems that had appeared in his last published collection, ten years earlier, and are the versions that readers study today. These and others from the 1842 *Poems* were proof of Tennyson's power in handling short and long forms and in envisioning complete stories and his proclivity toward natural and human heroics. Even through these examples each has a sense of completeness that he was unable to achieve with "The Eagle," they also show a sense of storytelling that this short fragment only hints at. Although all of the action is reserved for the last line, when the eagle plummets down into the sea, this fall is made meaningful by the sense of drama that is built up in the five lines preceding it.

One of the finest examples from the 1842 book and one that seems to capture the wealth of most of Tennyson's other work is "Ulysses," his version of the myth handed down since antiquity in Homer's *The Odyssey.* In Tennyson's version, Ulysses is back from his thirty-year-adventure in the Trojan War and is rulingIthaca once more. He is, in his own words, an "idle king" grown lazy and bored with ruling people that he does not know any more because of his long absence. He can see that his son Telemachus is more suited for the job of leading a government than he is, and so, in the end, he decides to sail off with his aging crew, once more, to find new adventures. In this poem are the classical allusions of much of Tennyson's most imaginative work as well as the roiling angst of a great man whose emotions are held in check, which is a point that is alluded to in many of his shorter, non-narrative works. Ulysses seems to be a better-defined, human version of the eagle, standing tall at great heights and then growing tired, drooping under the weight of sheer existence despite the grandeur that surrounds him. Like "The Eagle," "Ulysses" is allowed to leave matters unsettled and to respect the intelligence of readers, who are allowed to draw their own conclusions. It is a poem that can reveal the nature of power and frailty, but only if one is willing to read those elements into it.

Between the 1842 volume and 1850, the pivotal year that changed his life so drastically, Tennyson published *The Princess* in 1847. It was his first full-length narrative poem, and its success was mixed. The poem was meant to address the issue of education for women and the establishment of women's colleges, which was controversial at the time. The critical response tended to divide Tennyson's talents into two parts, the better to assess them. His story has central male and female characters that are destined for ruin until they start acting out the traditional gender roles, with the man becoming more masculine and the female turning feminine and both finding their fulfillment by parenting a new generation. Critics found the story forced, but they could not easily dismiss it

because it was laden with fine, short poems, such as "Crossing the Bar," which has come to be one of Tennyson's most lasting poems. The lyrical poems each worked fine by themselves, and if the poet could have stayed with short lyric expressions or even the sort of lengthy emotional ruminations of his next book, *In Memoriam,* he may have turned out a different sort of writer. The best examples of Tennyson's writings are these poems, taken out of the book and left to stand as fragments, giving them the missing context and the internal energy that powers "The Eagle."

The Princess was enthusiastically accepted by the reading public and continually required repub-lication over the next generation. *In Memoriam,* a powerful evocation of the psychology of grief, established him as one of the greatest poetic voices of his generation, and, as if that needed official government verification, Queen Victoria found Tennyson to be a personal favorite, which finalized his appointment to the post of Poet Laureate. He was no longer a poet who was at liberty to scribble off his thoughts and develop them wherever they might lead him any more. Although his new post and fame gave him a degree of economic freedom, they carried with them a responsibility to his fans and to his country.

It is particularly understandable, given the circumstances, that "The Eagle" would remain a fragment. The time of his life that this poem appeared seems to have been the last time when he could let a good idea to stand on its own without being developed or explained. Of course there were critics who complained that fame and success had spoiled Tennyson, as there might be such critics, today, who complain of a poet who rises so far and so fast. This attitude represents an overgeneralization: Tennyson's ability as a poet in no way became weaker when he took over his new position, nor did his instincts become in any way muted or deluded. He still showed the same lyric brilliance that he always had, and his weakness was still in telling stories and in trying to directly advocate any particular morality. The difference was that he no longer had the market forces to consider or to hold him back from his own worst instincts.

Possibly his best known work today, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" offers an illustration. This poem, about a failed military charge during the Battle of Balaclava in 1854, was reputedly written out by Tennyson in a matter of hours, polished in a matter of days, and eventually acclaimed as something of a national treasure. In some ways it is the opposite of "The Eagle," in that it tells a long, heroic narrative with little verbal grace and almost no sense of mystery. In other ways, it is the opposite of "Ulysses": while the earlier poem expressed pity for the successful military figure in peacetime, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" celebrated a military failure, churning up nationalistic emotions about an episode that would hardly be worth dwelling on if not for the heroic lilt given by the poet's skill with words. "Into thevalley of Death / rode the six hundred," the poem proclaims with thundering language, and readers of several generations have thundered along with them, feeling the uplifting cadence of Tennyson's rhythm carry them like the roll of galloping horses. Like Tennyson's other narratives, this poem was more popular with the general public than with critics, who found little subtlety here.

It is a bit unfair to generalize about all of Tennyson's work between 1850, when he was made Laureate, and 1892, when he died, on the basis of one popular poem. Still, it is

not a judgement, only a fact, that most of the poet's work after that date was done in the long, epic form. *Idylls of the King* was begun in 1859 and put into final form in 1885. *Maud,* which was published the year after "The Charge of the Light Brigade," was a long epic built of self-contained quatrains. The isolated fragment such as "The Eagle" was certainly worth writing, as any one who has read it can attest, but it probably would not have been written once Tennyson reached a position of comfort. It is only fitting that the poet would turn his attention to lengthier material once he had the comfort to do so. It is the poetry of a struggling poet who does not have answers to the questions he raises and is not willing to pretend that he does; society rightfully expects more assurance from those raised to honored positions.

Source: David Kelly, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Robisch is an assistant professor of ecological and American literature atPurdue University. In the following essay, he focuses on the mythic eagle versus the physical eagle in Tennyson's poetic fragment.

Birds have long been known as the representatives of the flight of the soul and as mediators between heaven and earth. They have been characterized according to the traits that seem most dominant to the writers who watch them; the crow's blackness, the lark's song, the peacock's plumage. In poetry as a whole□but very often in poems about birds, it seems□readers learn about the poet's own preferences, about some personal condition, or a general human condition, that the poet wishes to symbolize through the bird. The real characteristics of the bird are limited to the ones most useful for the poem, and so what readers finally envision in the writing is sometimes less the actual bird than a character that serves the writer's purpose. Edgar Allen Poe's raven is mysterious and tormenting; Howard Nemerov's phoenix is fearsome and religious; Ted Hughes' hawk in "Hawk Roosting" is arrogant and godlike. Unlike Hughes, who gives his raptor careful attention in several stanzas, Alfred Tennyson gives readers a great bird in a small poem, "The Eagle," a brief glimpse at his raptor, and, ultimately, at his own preferences for the craft of a formalist poem.

Tennyson wrote epic poems and lyrics about grand literary moments, most of which were more fictional than historical. "The Eagle" fits into this mode and, more generally, into the mode of the mid-nineteenth century, when the romantic vision of the world experienced its resurgence at the end of the Enlightenment. Tennyson has sometimes been called an Enlightenment poet, but although he did exhibit some interest in the sciences, his poetry hardly exhibited a scientific mind. The work is quintessentially romantic, and "The Eagle" has only been read as an ambiguous tribute rather than as a treatise on the nature of eagles. In *Tennyson as a Student and Poet of Nature,* printed not long after Tennyson's death, Sir Norman and Winnifred Lockyear make a case for Tennyson's interest in and knowledge of the natural world. But the Lock-years leave "The Eagle" out of their analysis, perhaps because the poem is too thin for readers to make any judgment about Tennyson's education regarding eagles. On the one hand, Tennyson holds the poem to plausible actions and stays out of the eagle's head, unlike Ted Hughes, who regularly imagines the thoughts of his animal subjects and uses them to present messages to humans. On the other hand, Tennyson is writing in the bardic tradition of having the eagle represent some condition of the world around it; the catch is that the condition is left for the reader to figure out.

This trick of ambiguity in poetry is now a cliché, unwelcome in contemporary craft because it absolves the poet of responsibility for the work. Leaving readers with too little to go on does not necessarily empower them. But Tennyson labeled the poem "a fragment," so that the reader knows that he intended it to be a kind of detail from a painting, or *a partita* in music□a piece intended to imply a larger work that could function according to the rules of the piece. Fragments were common in Tennyson's time□he had published several himself□and served the arts community as conversation

pieces. What lay behind the fragment was open to the speculation of the reader, which made finding reference points and comparisons for the piece a great preoccupation. So the mythic force of the eagle as indicated in a mere six lines generates in the reader of the poem opportunities for investing long conversation over history, mythology, other poems, and Tennyson himself. So has the project of literary criticism always been; to treat a work as the tip of an iceberg of thought. The project of literary criticism has always been to treat a written work as the tip of an iceberg of thought, and all the volumes about his poetry serve as proof that Tennyson's thought ran very deep and soared very high.

Besides "The Blackbird," which is a lyrical poem of observation, Tennyson's other "bird poems" are equally metaphoric. For example, the three-act, comedic play called *The Falcon* depicts the bird as a symbol of the royal court; "The Goose" is the symbol of relative wealth or poverty (yes, it lays a golden egg); and his "Song: The Owl" shows a white owl in a belfry watching over the passing of days. This last mention is closest to what Tennyson may be doing in "The Eagle," which is to depict the bird as a measure of time, a representative of the passage of one era and the coming of another (as at least one critic has observed through the language of withering age, such as "crag" and "wrinkle").

This focus on the end of an era was a popular sentiment during Tennyson's life. In America, where Tennyson was widely respected, such painters as Thomas Cole of the Hudson River School were depicting the ruins of great civilizations overgrown by nature, by the deep green of a new Eden, a return to the splendor of a natural world unbound. At the same time, many romantics, especially during times of war, tried to invoke, in their storybooks, the chivalry and mythic heroism of the Arthurian age with its forests and green fields. This was certainly a trait of Tennyson (well known for "The Charge of the Light Brigade"), and readers may easily see the eagle of his poem as Arthurian not only in its majestic position against the sky (and its being the representative bird of the high king in the courtly practice of falconry) but in its age and its fall at the poem's end.

Tennyson composed "The Eagle" inCauteretz, France, during a trip through the French Pyrenees in 1831, but the poem did not appear until twenty years later, in the seventh edition of his *Poems.* Literally, then, the poem might refer to a French eagle, a raptor of thePyrenees that Tennyson encountered. Or it could be that the eagle is a vision in Tennyson's mind, a bird he never actually saw while trekking. Perhaps he imagined it in the mountains around him near theMediterranean. Perhaps he imagined it back in Britain by theAtlantic. Perhaps he was thinking, as he often did, of the mythic stories he would rewrite in his poetry, and saw an eagle from an epic or a great romance, the regal bird from the mews of a great king. Whatever process he used is unknown, so the reader must turn to the form of the poem and the words he uses to depict the eagle in order to find out what sort of bird to imagine, to speculate about what sort of bird he was imagining.

But any poem about an animal deserves careful consideration of the animal as well as of the poet, which is why the reader might speculate about the role a real eagle plays in a poem about a mythic eagle. Even the mythic nature may be overstated, far-reaching

as it is. Many critics, for instance, have cited "The Eagle" as being a reference to the story of Icarus, who constructed a set of wax wings and flew too close to the sun, then fell when the wax melted. The images in the poem that look directly to this myth are few and vague; a number of sun myths, sky myths, and bird legends could be invoked by the right reader with a long reach for stories. More likely is the possibility that critics assume the Icarus myth because Tennyson probably assumed it; he loved Greek mythology, often incorporated into his poems, and lived in a time when schools included Greek and Latin as part of their curriculum. The widespread familiarity with Icarus may have prompted interpretations of the poem, just as the widespread belief in eagles as especially majestic birds prompts poets to write about them instead of, say, starlings or blue jays as mythic figures.

All of this talk about the mythic figure and the eagle as a symbol of however many things (time, age, the human condition, the romantic era, Arthurian majesty, the flight of Icarus) is really about the way readers particularly critics takes the language Tennyson chose and interprets it based on Tennyson's other works, the period during which he wrote, and, certainly, their own dispositions. For instance, some critics have found the line "The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls" to be an ingenious and beautiful depiction of the sea in motion, while others consider it to represent decrepitude or drunkenness. Here again the reader has what may be a strength of ambiguity, but what is more likely the poem's tremendous weakness.

Taken as is, the poem is a brief glimpse at an eagle, and perhaps the reader shouldn't require the poet to provide some better reason to look at a bird than simply to do so. The bird has its own value, the moment has its intrinsic merit. We might consider that Tennyson, while hiking in thePyrenees, saw above him on a crag, literally closer to the sun than he was, an eagle. Maybe he uses "hands" in place of "claws" or "talons" because he likes the sound, because the talons are the eagle's hands in terms of their use; it is anthropomorphic (presenting animals with human qualities), but there is not doubt that this is still an eagle. Maybe Tennyson himself is holding onto a lower crag, pulling himself along the mountain trail. He imagines the bird over "lonely lands" perhaps because he felt lonely at the time (although his trip was a good one, and he was with his closest friend, so this is less likely), or because for the poem's sake he imagined a wasteland, or because by "lonely" he may have simply meant unpopulated and rough country in southern France. Whether or not the poet can see the ocean from the mountains, he would know where it was, and could speculate that the eagle, with its keen vision and higher vantage point, could spot the sea. The wrinkles on the sea are simply a means for the reader to imagine wind on water, the notice of wind is very likely when one is in a high place, and thePyrenees are in a windy region. That the eagle falls like a thunderbolt is no more metaphoric than is a thunderbolt (that is, lightning) striking like an eagle. The simile is a means of showing us the speed of the drop, which, in the depiction of a bird of prey, is no great surprise even if it is still impressive. That the poem ends with the eagle's fall may only prove that the poet could not see where the eagle went when it left the crag hunting, flying, simply falling to the ground. Mountainous terrain could interfere with the point of view. And there is the fragment, just as readers experience many such fragments in their encounters with

other species when out on their excursions. The bird is present, then it is gone. The reader is merely trekking in its region.

Poets and critics alike, in any century, may sometimes be prone to favor the poet over the poem, the narrator over the subject matter. It is often assumed that what is important in a poem is what it says about humans, about the poet who wrote it, or about the act of reading. All of these are important, of course, and contribute to what makes poetry great. But the reader must also always pay attention to certain facts that provide them with poetry□facts they did not create, conditions of the world that make such poems about majestic birds possible. Tennyson chose an eagle for the same reason that Sir Edmund Hillary climbedMount Everest□because it was there. "The Eagle" is, finally, a poem about an eagle, and that brief bit of awareness may be important enough all by itself.

Source: S. K. Robisch, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

A group named Techno has a short clip of music incorporating Tennyson's poem into what they call "a groovin' ramble," available at http://artists.mp3s.com/artists/26/interval.html for download from MP3.

The Teaching Company, of Springfield, VA, includes an audiocassette lecture titled "Alfred, Lord Tennyson,England's National Treasure," as Lecture Twelve in a lecture series by John B. Fisher titled *Great Writers: Their Lives and Works.*

Robert Speaight and Arthur Luce Klein read poems from Tennyson on a cassette recording from Spoken Arts called *A Treasury of Alfred Lord Tennyson* from 1963. Included are selections from *The Princess* and *In Memoriam.*

A 1997 collection on audiocassette called *The Victorians* features poems by Tennyson, as well as Robert Browning, Lewis Carroll, Matthew Arnold, and others. Tennyson's poems are on Tape One of a six-tape set from Recorded Books.

Center for the Humanities presents a 1986 videocassette named *The Victorian Age,* which presents excerpts from the writings of Dickens, Browning, Arnold, Tennyson, Carlyle, and Ruskin.

Topics for Further Study

Write a brief descriptive poem about an animal, making people look at it in a way they never have before. In the last line, include a surprise action.

Compare this poem to Ted Hughes's "Hawk Roosting." Why do you think both birds are portrayed with such nobility? Which poem do you think contradicts that noble appearance most? How?

This poem has references to the ancient Greek myth of Icarus. Study that story, and explain how you think knowing it helps a reader interpret what Tennyson is saying here.

What Do I Read Next?

One of Tennyson's most respected biographers, Norman O. Page, wrote the text accompanying a book of pictures illustrating the poet's life and works called *Tennyson: An Illustrated Life.*

Replica Books has recently reissued the book *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son,* by Hallam Tennyson. For over a hundred years, this has been an important primary source for students studying Tennyson.

Robert Browning was the poet whose career most closely paralleled Tennyson's. A good collection of Browning's poetry is found in the Penguin Poetry Library's *Robert Browning: Selected Poems.*

Harold Bloom's volume *Alfred Lord Tennyson* for Chelsea House's *Modern Critical Views* series collects some of the most insightful, short essays available about the poet, including works by T. S. Eliot, Marshall McLuhan, andCleanth Brooks.

Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet, by Jerome Hamilton Buckley, is a well-considered, psychological biography. It was published by Harvard University Press in 1960.

Ekbert Faas' book *Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the Rise of Psychiatry* traces how the poetry of Tennyson and his contemporaries led almost directly to the science of the mind.

Further Study

Carr, Arthur J., "Tennyson as a Modern Poet," from *Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson,* edited by John Kill-ham, Routledge and Paul, 1960, pp. 41-66.

Examines themes and styles used in Tennyson's works that anticipated the twentieth-century rise of modernism.

Culler, A. Dwight, *The Poetry of Tennyson,* Yale University Press, 1977.

Culler looks at "The Eagle" as both an example of Victorian poetry and as an example of Tennyson's balance of nature with spirit.

Madden, Lionel, "Tennyson: A Reader's Guide," in *Writers and their Background: Tennyson,* D. J. Palmer, Editor,Ohio University Press, 1973, pp. 1-22.

Gives an overview of the poet's life. Directs readers to many other significant works about Tennyson.

Mustard, Wilfred P., *Classical Echoes in Tennyson,* The Fol-croft Press, Inc., 1970.

Traces similarities between "The Eagle" and Virgil'sThe Aeneid.

Pinion, F. B., *A Tennyson Chronology,* G. K. Hall & Co., 1990. Provides a detailed accounting of Tennyson's life, month-by-month in some parts. An invaluable tool for students of Tennyson.

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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.

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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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