Fable Study Guide

Fable by Octavio Paz

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Octavio Paz's beautiful and mysterious poem re- flects many of the ideas that characterize his work in the early 1950s after his return to Mexico from Paris. Like the other verses in the volume *Semillas para un himno* (*Seeds for Hymn*) in which it appears, the style of the twenty-two-line, visually rich, unrhymed, unpunctuated poem shows the influence of surrealism, an aesthetic movement that aimed to expand human self-expression by rejecting rational control and deliberate intent in favor of uncensored images springing from the subconscious. The poem describes a mythical landscape at the beginning of creation whose unity is suddenly shattered. With the fragmentation of this previously undifferentiated world comes human language. The images presented in the poem are unexpected and startling while having familiar echoes from myths of the Christian tradition and ancient Mexico.

The imagery, tone, and subtle allusions in the poem combine with powerful effect to present a picture of a paradise lost. The poem may be read as a depiction of a world corrupted by humans' attempt to express it in intellectual terms. It may also be viewed as a commentary on the modern predicament where humans are removed from each other because their lives lack the cohesion and meaning found in the sacred ancient myths. Another understanding of the poem is of the limitations of language to express the raw human experience that resides in the subconscious. The related themes of myth and language that figure in much of Paz's poetry are explored in "Fable" with characteristic insight, elegance, and erudition, but ultimately the poem offers no simple explanations about the nature of these subjects. Like the ancient myths themselves, the poem presents a story whose universal truths are not explicitly told but which lie buried, to be discovered using imagination and an opening up of the subconscious mind.

Author Biography

Paz enjoyed a distinguished career as a diplomat, playwright, essayist, and poet, and is regarded as one of the greatest writers and intellectuals of the twentieth century. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990, the first Mexican to be so honored, in recognition of a body of work that includes more than thirty volumes of poetry and over forty prose works on subjects ranging from Mexican culture to literary theory and Eastern philosophy.

Paz was born Octavio Paz Lozano in Mexico City in the middle of the Mexican Revolution in 1914. He was raised in the small town of Mixcoac by his mother, his aunt, and his paternal grandfather, a prominent liberal intellectual and novelist. Paz came into early contact with literature in his grandfather's extensive library. His father was a journalist and lawyer who had joined the uprisings led by Emiliano Zapata, the peasant leader of Mexico's 1910-to-1920 revolution. At age sixteen Paz published his first poem and founded a literary review. Three years later he published his first book of poems, *Luna silvestre* (1933), and founded another literary magazine. He attended Mexico City's National Autonomous University, where he joined a Marxist student group, marking the beginning of a long involvement with leftist causes. While in college he married writer Elena Garro, a union that would last twenty years and which produced a daughter, Helena.

In 1937 Paz left his formal university studies, committed to combining the ideals expressed in his poetry with tangible social action. He traveled to the Yucatan, where he helped to set up a school in a poor rural area. Later that year he went to Spain to join the Republican forces fighting General Francisco Franco in the civil war. He never saw active fighting, perhaps because his commitment to leftist ideals was doubted. Throughout his life Paz had disagreements with leftist leaders and intellectuals, despite his sympathies with the cause. Upon his return to Mexico via Paris, Paz continued to demonstrate his opposition to fascism by writing articles for left-wing journals and giving speeches. In 1938 Paz helped to found *Taller*, a literary journal that signaled the emergence of a new generation of writers in Mexico. As a Mexican living in the shadow of the European war, Paz found himself becoming increasingly dissatisfied with political revolution as a means of changing society. In 1943 he went to the United States on a two-year Guggenheim Fellowship, where he became immersed in Anglo-American Modernist poetry and founded a literary review that translated major contemporary poets into Spanish.

After completing his fellowship, Paz moved to Paris, where he lived from 1946 to 1951 and served as the Mexican cultural attache. In Paris he became friends with the Surrealist poet and artist André Breton, who had perhaps the greatest influence on Paz's poetry. Paz was to say later that his turning to Surrealism was a way of coming to terms with the problems of writing poetry in a godless world of existential alienation. Paz was engaged with various activities and publications organized by the Surrealists during his Paris years, and he developed the voice that would appear in some of his most important early poetry. Also during this time he published his seminal study of Mexican

identity, *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950), translated as *The Labyrinth of Solitude* in 1961.

After living abroad for eleven years, Paz returned to Mexico in 1953. A year later he published *Semillas para un himno* (1954; *Seeds for Hymn*), the volume in which the poem "Fable" appears. The collection was not well-received by Mexican critics, who charged that Paz had been overly influenced by European Surrealism and that he was not ideologically committed or engaged in ideas that were important for Mexico. His next two works, the collection of essays *El arco y la lyra* (1956; *The Bow and the Lyre*) and the volume of poetry *Piedra del sol* (1957; *Sun Stone*) were well-received by critics and confirmed Paz's status as a thinker and poet in his country. These works, like *Semillas para un himno*, are concerned with how language has separated humans from the world but yet must become a bridge between them using the powers of poetry.

By the early 1960s, Paz had established his reputation as a poet in Mexico and throughout the world. In 1962 he was appointed Mexican ambassa dor to India, where he was influenced by Indian philosophy and myths and produced two important works, *The Grammarian Monkey* and *East Slope*. During this time he married his second wife, Marie- Jose Tramini. In 1968 Paz resigned from the diplomatic service in protest against the government's suppression of student demonstrations during the Olympic Games in Mexico. Paz continued to write poetry and prose, translate poetry, and edit literary journals during the 1960s. Much of his writing during this period is infused with his experiences of living in the East. In the 1970s Paz taught at various universities, including Cambridge and Harvard, and wrote several collections of essays. His poetry and prose after the 1960s began to argue more openly for democracy. In several of his writings he severely criticized the leftist regimes of Cuba and Nicaragua, which led to charges by his critics that he was a neoconservative.

Throughout the 1980s Paz lectured, traveled, edited journals, translated poetry, and published prose works. In 1987 he published *Arbol adentro*, his first collection of poetry in eleven years. His contribution to world literature was recognized with numerous awards in addition to the Nobel Prize of 1990, including the International Poetry Prize (1964), the Jerusalem Prize (1977), the Golden Eagle Prize (1979), the Olin Yoliztli Prize (1980), an honorary degree from Harvard (1980), the Cervantes Prize (1981), the Neustadt Prize (1982), and the Frankfurt Peace Prize (1984). He died in Mexico City in 1998 at the age of eighty-four.

Poem Text

The age of fire and the age of air
The youth of water springing
From green to yellow
From yellow to red
From dream to vigil
From desire to act
You needed only one step and that taken without effort
The insects then were jewels who were alive
The heat lay down to rest at the edge of the pool
Rain was the light hair of a willow tree
There was a tree growing within your hand
And as it grew it sang laughed prophesied
It cast the spells that cover space with wings
There were the simple miracles called birds
Everything belonged to everyone
Everyone was everything
Only one word existed immense without opposite
A word like a sun
One day exploded into smallest fragments
They were the words of the language that we speak
They are the splintered mirrors where the world can see itself slaughtered.

Plot Summary

Title

The poem's title is important, as it alerts readers to its subject. A fable is a legendary story of supernatural or marvelous happenings, a tale with connotations of the mythic, the allegorical, and the fabulous. It can also be a story that is not true but that is nevertheless instructive of the truth through its underlying meaning. The title, then, leads readers to expect that the content of the poem will be not of this world yet perhaps contain within it a truth that is applicable to human life and experience.

Lines 1-7

The opening lines of the poem take us to a primordial age, to the very beginnings of time when there is nothing but the most basic elements of fire, air, and water. It is the period when the world, and even water itself, is still in its youth. The grounding element of earth is notably missing from the list, and the sense conveyed is that of freedom, lightness, and freshness. In the third line we learn that out of these elements comes life. It is at first green, signifying its newness, then matures to yellow and ripens to red. The act of creation that brings forth this world is performed completely effortlessly. There is "only a step" between a thing being a dream (an internal state of seeing) and a vigil (an external act of watching), between the desire for something and its being done. The unidentified creator who brings forth this life, referred to in line 7 as "you," may be God or Nature or some other principle of generation.

Lines 8-14

The next seven lines describe the paradaisical world that has been born. There is a sense of brightness and, again, lightness and freedom in the images of the created things, which are transformations of the elements of air, fire, and water: airborne insects are living jewels; heat in the air lies down to rest at the edge of a pond; rain cascades down gently as loose hair of a willow tree. The hand of creation (again referred to as "you" but not specifically identified) has a tree growing from its palm. This tree reminds us of the Tree of Knowledge in the Christian garden of Eden. However, this tree is not associated with reason but with laughter, song, and prophecy. The tree has an element of the magical as it casts spells to fill the air with wings and bring about the "simple miracles" that are birds.

Lines 15-18

In this primitive paradise, there is no division, and everything is held in common. Things are in fact completely unified so that there is no separation at all between people and objects: everything is one. Only a single word exists. This word has no opposite,

because all ideas and things are contained within it. It is like the sun, the source of all life, round and perfect and indivisible. There are echoes here of the Christian creation myth in which in the beginning there is nothing but the "word" as well as of ancient Mexican myths in which the sun is worshipped and held as sacred because of its power to make things grow.

Lines 19-22

The last four lines offer a dramatic contrast to the fluidity and airy, dreamlike nature of the earlier part of the poem. Paradise is shattered when the word, the sun, explodes and breaks into tiny pieces. Human language is born and, like fragments of a mirror, reflects in myriad ways the multitude of things in the world. This language does not see the world unified as in the innocent state of paradise, but presents a fractured, splintered reality. Words in human language reflect back to the world, which was single and unified in its sacred and original state, how its beauty and innocence have been destroyed.

Themes

Reason vs. Imagination

In a very important sense, any attempt to explicate the "themes" of "Fable" does a disservice to the poem, because it speaks to readers on a subconscious rather than a conscious level. It seems to try to tell readers about a truth that cannot be explained in intellectual, reasoned terms but which are meaningful and representative of the human experience nonetheless.

One way to see the poem is as a visual representation of the subconscious mind unbounded by the fetters of rational thought. In the harmonious age that is described, there are free associations of images and ideas. Connections are made effortlessly and the fantastic is commonplace. Paz uses and overturns the biblical symbol of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, for in his dreamlike Eden the tree is not a symbol of reason but of imagination. He describes it as having grown out of the hand of Nature (or some other creator) and says that it "sang laughed prophesied," casting spells and creating miracles. The entire description of the paradise is one that requires readers to use imaginative power, to make connections between what would otherwise be thought of as disparate images. But these ideas and connections are possible in the imagination and in the subconscious. At the end of the poem, paradise is destroyed and its unity is fragmented. A possible interpretation of this is that reasoned discourse or description, in trying to capture the unified, uninhibited experiences of the subconscious, cannot do justice to it. The explanation of it is doomed to be fragmented and partial.

Language

Related to the idea of the tension between reason and imagination is the concept of the limitations of language. Again it seems dangerous and counter to the spirit of "Fable" to try to tease out a single "meaning" about the nature of language in its lines to explain what is being expressed. Paz seems to be pointing to the idea that there is a gap between an experience and the expression of it in language. Or perhaps he is saying that human experience cannot be expressed in certain types of language. He talks about the unity of the "word." It should be mentioned that the concept of the "word" was important for surrealists, who aimed to restore language to its original purity by releasing it from constricting rules so it could do justice to humans' inner vision. In "Fable," the "word" encompasses all things in the universe. It may be thought of as the true expression of truth that is corrupted by an attempt to recount it in "the language that we speak." When we understand the "word" we understand the primordial nature of human existence, but any attempt to explain what this is in ordinary language is bound to fail. Or it may be that for Paz the "word" is all the facts and feelings of the world that are conveyed in poetry but which cannot be expressed in non-imaginative language, for example in the languages of philosophy or politics or science. So then the "word" may be seen as poetic language that reflects the world in its unity, while its fragmentation

symbolizes the attempt of discursive language to explain those things that only poetry can convey.

Myth

Myth is centrally important in Paz's poetry and is connected with his ideas about language and the subconscious. In many of his writings, Paz emphasizes the alienation and isolation of twentieth-century humans from each other and the world. Ancient people, he believed, found meaning and cohesion in their lives through the understanding of sacred stories and rituals. Myths communicate the common values and experiences of people across cultures and histories by tapping into and trying to make sense of humans' basic and common experiences. Myths then are a reflection of humans' subconscious longings and visions of themselves and the world. Paz hoped that a return to an understanding of humans' stories, recreated for the modern world by the poet, could reconnect humanity with its lost soul. Early in his life Paz sought through politics to effect change in society and return people to a more harmonious existence, but became disillusioned and gave up hope for the transformation of society through political revolution. Paz felt also that in the modern age people were removed from religious beliefs that traditionally served to connect them to the sacred, to each other, and to the world. In this secularized and fragmented society, people needed a new world image, new mythology, to give meaning to their existence.

In "Fable" myth functions on various levels. Most obviously, the setting of the poem is a mythical time. It presents a creation myth and a myth of a "golden age" where there is unity and harmony among all things. The poem also calls up biblical and ancient Aztec myths. There is, as mentioned earlier, an allusion to the Tree of Knowledge from the Garden of Eden. There is a symbol of the sun, which was the principle of creation and the source of life in Aztec mythology. The image of the word that appears later in the poem calls up ideas from Christian mythology; in the Christian New Testa ment, the word or "logos" is all that exists at the beginning of time. With the explosion of the word and the introduction of language, the ancient mythical world is shattered. A feeling of dislocation and disharmony enters where before there was unity. So then the poem may be seen as portraying a wondrous world in which myth and the sacred pervade the landscape but which when destroyed give rise to fragmented, isolated modern existence.

Style

Surrealism

"Fable," like many poems set in a surrealist mode, is difficult to make sense of at first, since nothing is said literally. The poem moves through a series of images that displace the reader into an altered state of understanding and consciousness. The recipient of these surreal images is forced to make connections between pictures and ideas that he or she would not ordinarily make. Yet at the same time the subject matter of the poem, a fable or myth, leads the reader to expect the supernatural and marvelous in the poem. The effect, then, is of being transported to a fantastic but not unsettling world. But at the end of the poem disharmony enters this blissful state, and the reader is made to experience a sense of dislocation.

Style

"Fable" was originally written in Spanish, and there are no doubt stylistic elements in the poem that are not captured in the English language. However, it is very much a poem that relies on visual images and ideas, which are effectively rendered in translation. The first fourteen lines of the poem, in which paradise is described, move slowly and languidly. There is a clear absence of grammatical structure from the beginning□in the first six lines of the poem there is no complete sentence at all□yet there is a clear sense of movement and easy rhythmic flow. Creation bursts forth but it is expressed in terms that effect a feeling of simplicity and calm. Life begins green, becomes yellow, then turns to red. Each transition and phase of growth is simple and effortless. As lines 6 and 7 express, there is only one step taken by the creator between the desire for something and its action, and the diction echoes the grace and ease of that step. Punctuation is also notably absent from the poem. This works also to convey a sense of freedom and uninhibited flow. As the things of paradise are described, similes are not used, but a sense of magic and, again, freedom is imparted by the use of direct metaphors. The insects are not *like* jewels; they *are* jewels. Rain *is* the hair of a willow tree. Birds *are* simple miracles. The startling images are presented too in a matter-of-fact way to emphasize that this blissful world is simply the way things are, a harmonious and perfect paradise. The poem says that a tree grew out of the creator's hand, and as it grew, "sang laughed prophesied." The lack of punctuation between the verbs again presents a feeling of effortlessness and a sense that these three actions are one and the same thing. The general feeling of lightness in the early part of the poem is highlighted with the creation of birds and other winged creatures.

The tone shifts slightly with the fifteenth line. The visual description ends and the images presented become abstract. The descriptors used are general (everyone, everything, immense), and the explanation of the unified world given tersely. In contrast to the direct analogies used earlier, the word here is likened to the sun, not said to be the same thing. Suddenly with line 19 the tone changes again, this time more

dramatically, with the shattering of the single, unified word. The use of the word "explode" comes as a violent outburst on the peaceful landscape of the poem. Immediately the "immense word" is contrasted with the "smallest" pieces of the mirror. The diction used (fragment, splintered, slaughtered) comes in stark contrast to the words used before, presenting a feeling of dislocation after the wondrous experience of harmony.

Imagery

The early part of the poem is full of interesting and unexpected images. The birth and burgeoning of the created world is presented by using colors green, yellow, red that are not really images but raw visual experiences that capture all the possibilities of generation, maturation, and ripening. More unexpected images come with insects who are jewels, heat resting by a pool, rain that is hair on a tree, and a tree growing from within a hand. Many of the images are elemental and primordial. There are the elements of fire, air, and water, and the very basic images of a tree, pool, birds, and sun.

The most powerful image, at the end of the poem, is that of the mirror. This image figures in many of Paz's surrealist poems. It is a symbol of outer reality, or the world, reflected in a partial way. The understanding of reality that comes with this sort of reflection is necessarily inadequate because it cannot capture inner longings. The mirror indicates a sense of imprisonment in time and space, as all of reality is rendered as static rather than dynamic. The broken pieces of the mirror here are the words of human language, perhaps an indication that language reflects only a partial reality even as it seeks to express inner human experience.

Historical Context

Mexico from the 1910 Revolution to the 1930s

Paz's political beliefs and artistic concerns were shaped by events and ideas that he was exposed to at home and abroad. His early experiences growing up in Mexico in the shadow of the 1910-20 Revolution no doubt influenced his leftist leanings. The Revolution, which was begun by Francisco Madero, came in response to the gross inequality of land holdings between the wealthy and peasant classes under Porforio Diaz. Even after Diaz's overthrow, the fighting continued, and numerous revolutionary leaders (including peasant leaders Emilio Zapata and Pancho Villa) and a million others were killed in a bloody struggle for power. From 1921 to 1933 a series of presidents held office in Mexico. Despite making some gains in economic growth, government became increasingly corrupt and conservative, and large pockets of discontent remained among the Mexican populace. Some improvement came with the 1934 election of Lazaro Cardenas, who carried out land reform and established state-managed collective farms. As a student in the 1930s, Paz sympathized with the leftist cause, which he saw as offering hope for reforming Mexican society and closing the widening gap between rich and poor.

The Rise of Fascism in Europe

In 1936 Paz left his university studies to set up a school in a poor rural area in the Yucatan. He wanted to put into action those political ideals that had already started to manifest in his poetry, about improving the lives of those living with the alienating effects of an abstract capitalist economy. His poetry of this period is highly political and reflects a bright hope for revolution. This idealistic fervor continued when he moved to Spain to aid in the civil war and fight against right-wing forces. In this conflict, conservative forces in Spain overthrew the second Spanish republic. The war pitted Nationalists, led by the wealthy landowners and aristocracy, Catholic Church, military leaders, and fascist Falange party against the Loyalists, which consisted of liberals, anarchists, socialists, and Communists. Paz was one of many young idealistic volunteers from around the world who went to Spain to fight for the Loyalists. The Nationalist cause was aided by the fascist governments of Italy and Nazi Germany, and the Loyalists received supplies from the Soviet Union. Franco eventually wore down the Loyalists, conquering Barcelona and Madrid in early 1939. But for Paz, saving the Spanish republic was an idealistic cause, and during his year there he was firm in his socialist dream of equality among all people brought through revolution. However, Paz was to remark later in his life that the year he spent in Spain sowed the seeds for his rejection of a purely political revolution as a hope to reform humans and the world.

Mexico in the Early 1940s

Back in Mexico, Paz continued his fight against fascism by founding and editing several revolutionary literary journals. He began also to consider the place of the poet in the world, as a historical agent and an agent of change. The events of the early 1940s, with the entire world engaged in war, made Paz despair about the world situation and the possibility for change. In Mexico, President Cardenas stepped down and was replaced by Avila Camacho. Camacho and his successor, Miguel Aleman Valdes, placed heavy emphasis on industrial growth while downplaying redistributive social reforms and economic nationalism. This policy led to the uneven distribution of wealth once again. Income inequalities, inflation, intellectual ferment, and government repression were a feature of Mexican political life in the 1940s. The squabbles among various socialist groups, with their rival opinions about the duties of writers and intellectuals, forced Paz into retreat from political engagement. In 1943 he left for the United States, where he reflected on his position as a Mexican in the shadow of the European war, before moving to France for six years and then traveling in Asia.

Surrealism

Paz's years in Paris mark a significant period of development in this thinking as an artist, as he moved further away from the ideals of political change and embraced the principles of surrealism. It would be misleading to say that his contact with surrealist modes of thought in France influenced or changed Paz's approach to poetry, but rather he found in surrealism many of the ideas that he had been drawn to throughout his artistic and intellectual life. Founded in the 1920s by the Frenchman André Breton, with whom Paz became friends during his Paris stay, the movement began as a revolt against the control exercised by rationality over accepted modes of expression. Breton attacked pre conceptions about the nature and function of words and advocated free expression of uncensored images that well up from the subconscious using a technique of "automatic writing." Paz was impressed by the revolutionary principles of the movement, with its faith in the power of the imagination to revitalize poetry and art to compensate for the sociopolitical forces that he had begun to find so oppressive and stultifying. Some of the other interests of the surrealists, who were greatly influenced by Sigmund Freud's new theories of psychoanalysis, were the exploration of the whole self through the individual's dream and fantasy worlds as well as conscious life; the restoration of the "word" or expression to its original purity; a desire to step beyond the bounds of human experience; and the tension between imagination and reason. "Fable," written after Paz's return from France, shows a clear affinity with surrealism, with its dreamlike quality, lack of inhibition, and unusual imagery that shocks readers into an awareness of areas of the subconscious that had not previously been called upon. Although Paz's work continued to be shaped by his exposure to different cultures and ideas that he came into contact with on his extensive travels, even his later poetry has affinities with surrealism, with its concerns about the constraints of language, the use of unexpected images, and the desire to expand the range of human expression. Paz's engagement with surrealism was crucial to his artistic development, as it offered

him the possibility for radical social change not in the political arena but beginning in the arena of human subconscious.

Literary Heritage

Modern Mexican society has its roots in two diverse cultures, those of the indigenous Indians and the Spanish. Mexico's language, religion, and the racial composition of its people□Spaniards, Indians, and mestizos (those of mixed ancestry)□ clearly reflect these elements. The official language is Spanish, but many Mexicans still speak only indigenous tongues. Some 90 percent of the people are Roman Catholic, but the practice of Catholicism in Mexico is heavily influenced by pre-European religious ideas.

In "Fable," Paz takes readers back to the dawn of time and offers mythical retelling of the creation of the world. Much of Paz's poetry is influenced by mythology from Mexico and other cultures, and this poem seems to have elements of both Christian and ancient Mexican mythology. Before the arrival of the Spanish in Mexico in the early sixteenth century, the great indigenous civilizations of the Olmec, Aztec, Maya, Toltec, Mixtec, and Zapotec flourished in Mexico. There are many similarities to the religions and myths of all these peoples, and resemblances between the myths of these cultures to those of Christianity.

The indigenous group that dominated central Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest were the Aztecs (also known as Mexicas), and they are regarded by many as the ancestors of the Mexican people. They practiced a polytheistic religion, and their chief god was Huitzilopochtli, a god of the sun and war. The Aztecs viewed the development of the universe as a steady evolution during successive periods of "suns." This evolution, it was believed, could only be interrupted by catastrophic revolutions or by natural catastrophes during the transition of one sun to the next. They also believed that within each sun only those forms of earthly life could flourish that were organized according to the principles governing the order of the prevalent constellation. Many Aztec myths also have similarities with those found in the Christian tradition. The world, it is said, began with the creation of a man and a woman in a delightful garden. There is a legend also of a pyramid built that threatens to touch the sky, displeasing the gods, which is much like the Christian story of the Tower Of Babel. Another tale with likenesses to the Tower of Babel story is that of Teocipactli and Yochiquetzal, the man and woman who were saved from the Great Flood. It is said that they had many children, but they were all dumb until a dove from the branches of a tree taught them to speak. Their tongues, however, were so diverse that they could not understand one another.

When the Spanish conquered the indigenous people, Christian priests were quick to see parallels between the Aztec and Christian religions and used the similarities in order to convert them more effectively. Mexican culture today reflects the heritage of its Indian and Spanish ancestry with rituals that are not found in European Catholicism but which can be traced back to pre-Hispanic origins. Mexico's most popular celebration, the Day of the Dead, can be traced to the festivities held during the Aztec month of Miccailhuitontli, ritually presided by the goddess Mictecacihuatl and dedicated to children and the dead. In the Aztec calendar, this ritual fell roughly at the end of July, but it was moved by the priests to coincide with the Christian holiday of All Hallows Eve to

transform it from a "profane" to a Christian celebration. The result is that Mexicans now celebrate the Day of the Dead during the first two days of November, and the modern festivity is characterized by a blend of ancient aboriginal and introduced Christian features. In myriad other ways Mexican culture reflects the fusion of European and Indian ideas.

Critical Overview

Although Paz's work has been extensively reviewed and analyzed in Spanish and English, there are no sustained critical treatments of "Fable" in English. The work is generally discussed with the other poems in the 1954 volume *Semillas para un himno* (*Seeds for a Hymn*), which is often viewed as representing a particular phase in Paz's career as a thinker and a poet. Its initial reception in Mexico was mixed. Paz published the volume shortly after returning to his native land after eleven years abroad, six of which were spent in Paris among André Breton and other French surrealists. The surrealist elements and tone of *Semillas para un himno* are obvious. Many Mexican critics were appalled at the work, which they said had no social or political relevance to what was happening in Mexico at the time. Jason Wilson, in his study of Paz's life and career, explains the reaction of critics and poets to the volume: "The period of the mid-1950s in Mexico saw the term 'surrealist' become the 'forbidden word'. . . . For Raúl Leiva the poems [in *Semillas para un himno*] were hermetic with a total loss of feeling for humanity. Silva Villalobos found them inhuman and not Mexican. . . . That surrealism could still provoke reactions in 1954 may surprise. Augusto Lunel, reviewing the same book, claimed that the term surrealist became an adjective for whatever could not be understood." There were also favorable reviews of the collection, but in general critics viewed *Semillas para un himno* as evidence that Paz had been "corrupted" by his stay in Europe.

The interest in and popularity of "Fable" in English is indicated by its inclusion in two important English-language collections of Paz's early poetry. The poet Muriel Rukeyser translated the poem and included it in *Early Poems: 1935-1955*, and it appeared in Eliot Weinberger's *Octavio Paz: Selected Poems*, which appeared in 1969 and was reissued several times. Unfortunately, only a few critics have offered any remarks at all on the poem, and those who mention it do so only in passing, summarizing it in a sentence or two. Rachel Phillips, writing in 1972, in discussing mirror imagery in Paz's work, notes that the mirror motif in "Fable" "acts as one of the threads unifying Paz's great themes of epistemology, solitude, and language." Gordon Brotherston's 1975 discussion of Latin American poetry offers the provocative suggestion that the "golden age" Paz describes is an ironic reminder of the triteness of the perfect society as a political entity. Jason Wilson, is his 1986 study of Paz's life and work, sees the poem as depicting an original world where there is no alienation. He sees it as a world "bound by interlocking metaphors . . . the original metaphorical quality of language itself released from its twentieth-century straitjacket."

Although the poem "Fable" itself has not received much notice by English-language critics, this is by no means an indication of Paz's general reputation among readers outside Mexico. He is admired throughout the world not only as one of the masters of the Spanish language but, as indicated by the Nobel committee, as a giant figure in world literature whose work is marked by "impassioned writing with wide horizons, characterized by sensuous intelligence and humanistic integrity."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kukathas is a freelance writer and a student in the Ph.D. program in philosophy at the University of Washington, where she is specializing in social, political, and moral philosophy. In the following essay, she argues that in "Fable" Paz expresses what he takes to be the limitations of language by using poetry to move beyond its confines.

Upon initial reading, most people no doubt find Octavio Paz's "Fable" to be a curious poem. Many readers have difficulty discerning its meaning at first sight. The poem begins by presenting a series of strange visual images that appear not to hang together, and then moves on to offer equally odd abstract images. However, the beauty and challenge of his poem, like so many of Paz's works, is that it requires the imagination of the reader to be exercised in order for the poem to be fully appreciated and understood. The poem expresses its message or story not by using overt explanations or descriptions, but taps into the reader's innermost mind and subconscious to draw out its multiple possibilities. This is especially effective in the case of "Fable" since it seems in fact to be a work *about* the limits of literal or static descriptions that are given in language. "Fable" offers readers an understanding of the limits of language using□paradoxically□the medium of language. But it does this by showing that the "word" of poetry allows readers to move beyond language to understand the truth that lies behind it.

Paz wrote "Fable" after his years in Paris, where he associated with the French surrealists. For the surrealists, the notion of the "word" was central. The many techniques of composition they employed, such as "automatic writing," sought to "release" the energy of the word from the prison of rational thought. Their goal was to allow a person's introspection and subjective ideas, those thoughts and sensations and experiences deep in the unconscious, to emerge and be expressed despite the limitations of the conscious mind. The word, once it was removed from the strictures of what seemed to "make sense" in logical terms, could, it was hoped, express what might otherwise be thought of as inexpressible.

In "Fable," Paz offers a view of language that is compatible with the surrealists' conception of it in a form that is true to the inner vision that surrealism seeks to clarify. In the poem Paz offers a picture of the unconscious mind using terms that don't "make sense," or cannot be captured in rational terms, but which express an inner experience. In the early part of the poem, the reader is presented with a lush visual description of a paradise. The images that are supplied are remarkably simple but contain within them a wealth of associations. When the reader tries to understand them literally, or to see them in the strictures of the rational mind, they mean nothing. But when pedantic understanding is cast aside, the words start to make sense in a much different way.

The poem opens by establishing the setting. It is an age of fire and of air, an age when water is in its youth. Right away the images used show that this is a primordial, primitive world. And the associations the reader is likely to have with them□of the basic elements that produce all of life□make it a very real and concrete and sensual world. But the

absence of the element of earth also is significant because it calls into question the concreteness of this world. In the fourth line the description slips without warning to that of created things growing and maturing and ripening: "From green to yellow / Yellow to red." The account makes little sense if it is read literally. But the associations that the reader makes□of green with growing things in their youth, yellow with organic objects as they mature, and red with things as they ripen□make clear what idea is being conveyed. What is required for it to be understood is, again, for the reader to look beyond language to ideas that reside in the subconscious. Paz is relying on the reader's ability to move beyond the confines of the literal word and the conscious mind to be able to make free associations with images and ideas to understand the truth behind his words.

The series of surprising images that are offered in lines 8 to 10 also require readers to move beyond discursive thought to be fully appreciated. The visual descriptions given are of insects that are jewels, heat that lays down to rest, rain that is the hair of a tree, and a tree that grows out of somebody's hand. All these representations cannot be explained in rational language or justified in terms of what the conscious mind knows to be true. But the existence of these things is possible in the subconscious. Just as in dreams when strange and disparate images come together to tell a story that is understood by the dreamer, these images come together to tell a story if the mind allows itself to be open to it. The use of direct metaphors (the rain is not simply *like* the hair of a willow tree but *is* the hair of a willow tree) creates a sense of fusion, oneness, and synthesis among all things in the universe. And once more the free association between images allows readers to understand this unity without it being explicitly stated.

The tree growing from within a hand is a fantastic picture. As Rachel Phillips points out in her study of Paz's work, the image of the tree in Paz's poetry often symbolizes humans' rootedness and is used to stand for humans' physical bodies. Here there are no roots in the earth (as was pointed out earlier, earth is noticeably absent from the landscape), which reinforces the idea of freedom and possibility. But the symbol of the tree seems to indicate a sense of belonging, suggesting that there is some real connection between humans and this marvelous and dreamlike world.

The various associated images in the first part of the poem combine to create a sense of a landscape or time or place that is at once fabulous but strangely familiar. Making sense of these images has required the reader to exercise certain non-rational powers, and the place being understood using those powers feels oddly close to home. This is because what is being described in the poem is in fact that place from which these powers spring□the subconscious. The poem uses the reader's imagination and the immediate experiences he or she has had in calling upon associations to build, without using overt explanation, a most vivid picture of the subconscious mind. This depiction of the subconscious is shown through language on the one hand, since the medium is the poem. But in another way poetry cuts through the confines and clumsiness and inexactness of discursive language to speak to the subconscious in a voice that it can better understand□and allows it to recognize itself.

In the latter part of the poem the imagery shifts from being visual to being abstract. Although the images are still unusual, the tone of the poem changes so that the reader is no longer left with a strange but familiar *feeling* but must try to *understand* what is going on in the poem in a quite different way. It is explained that this world that has been depicted is a single, unified world: "Everything belonged to everyone / Everyone was everything." These two lines have overtones of a socialist utopia, where there is no ownership and there is perfect harmony. The lines call up associations, but they are not the same sorts of sensuous, basic images that were given earlier in the poem. The reader does not even have to make any associations to understand these lines; they are simple and expository. The very tone indicates a movement out of the realm of the subconscious to a more conscious understanding.

The poem goes on to say that in this world only a single word existed. It was immense and without opposite. Everything that may be described or talked about existed within that single word. Returning to the earlier discussion of the "word," this can be seen as showing that in this subconscious, primitive world, there is a true expression of how things "are," of what deep human experiences feel like, of what truth without the rules of consciousness is in actuality. But this word that expresses all things and the harmony of the world explodes into fragments. All that there is now are pieces of a mirror that reflects partially and statically the truth that before was whole. The truths of the subconscious mind cannot be told literally. Once this is even attempted, the images that are projected are not reflective of that deep reality, but of the world seen by the conscious mind.

That Paz uses the medium of a poem to express this idea of the limits of language might be seen as undercutting what he says in the last lines of the poem about a splintered reality viewed through language. But the presence and form of the poem itself works as a very important factor *in* "Fable." Most forms of language cannot describe those feelings and ideas that well up from the unconscious or even explain the subconscious in any meaningful way at all. When a person tries to describe a dream he or she had at night to someone else the next day there is simply no way the experience can be conveyed fully. Even the person who had the dream might remember his or her own experience in a dim way in the light of conscious thought. But poetry, like the original "word," does not do such disservice to the ideas of the subconscious. Poetry does not offer a fragmented reality because it not only uses language but the silences between words. It allows the mind to reach down into itself and understand the world not only at a conscious level but at an unconscious one as well. It reveals the truth to us that is behind our rational thoughts, by opening up our minds. Paz does not explain this in any of the words of "Fable" but shows it by having the poem itself work on the reader's subconscious to better understand itself.

Source: Uma Kukathas, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In this essay on Selected Poems *of Octavio Paz, author John M. Fein discusses the use of the mirror as both image and theme in the works of Paz. Fein sees the mirror as symbolic of the endless possibilities for the poet to both find and lose himself in the act of creation.*

One of the principal reasons for the success of the poetry of Octavio Paz is that it can be meaningful without being inaccessible and highly refined in form without being meaningless. It is axiomatic that the poet of the 20th century, no matter what language he uses to declare himself, must express his personal feelings and reactions. Even when discoursing on absolutes and infinites, he must maintain a close relationship between his views and his own experiences. The demands on his readers, accordingly, have been proportionately greater, and in Mexico as in the United States, have made the reading of vanguard poetry a trying task in the last quarter of a century. The reader never knows what kind of intellectual wardrobe he may be called upon to pack for his esthetic voyages. But recent years have seen a return to sanity in poetry, not only by individual poets who write understandably, but also as a perceptible literary movement. For many midcentury poets, this signifies the ability to blend the personal and the universal, the particular and the general, and to strike a balance in technique as well as in choice of subject.

The fact that the new poetry is accessible, however, does not mean that it is easy; there are still many aspects of it that remain obscure. Although there is seldom one explanation which clarifies everything in a poet's work, there are frequently key ideas that can be of help, and it is with one of these, the device of the mirror, that we wish to concern ourselves here. What we propose is to observe the ways in which the poet has used the mirror as image and as theme, and to deduce from these uses conclusions which may be applied to all of Paz's work, especially with respect to his concept of reality and his reaction to it.

There are two primary reasons for selecting the mirror as the point of departure instead of other abstractions which the poet also dwells upon. First is the fact that the mirror is referred to with much greater frequency and intensity than any of the others, particularly in *Libertad bajo palabra*, in which the mirror occurs in the introduction, the last section of the concluding poem, and repeatedly in the pages in between, to such an extent that the reader's first impression is that the mirror is an obsession or at least a fixation of Paz. Its importance for the poet is also indicated by its repeated appearance in articles and in poetry published subsequent to *Libertad bajo palabra.* Secondly, Paz has given the problem of reality a dominant place in his work, and the mirror, as tradition would lead one to expect, is ideally suited for the exploration of this subject.

There is no significant appearance of the mirror in Paz's collections of poetry before *A la orilla del mundo* or in his latest volume of poems (1954). The poems which concern us most here, therefore, are those of *A la orilla del mundo* and *Libertad bajo palabra*. In fact, the former contains only a limited number of references to the mirror, and of these

the majority apply to descriptions or to objects not having a direct and close relationship to the poet's interior life; in these cases, the mirror, if it is mentioned at all□it is suggested more frequently than stated□tends to be a brief image which is engulfed in the procession of other images and other subjects which follow it in close order. Such is the case in "Palabra":

Palabra, voz exacta
y sin embargo equívoca;
oscura y luminosa;
herida y fuente: espejo;
espejo y resplandor;
resplandor y puñal,
vivo puñal amado,
ya no puñal, sí mano suave: fruto.

In any case, glimpsed briefly or not, the mirror in *A la orilla del mundo* is always subordinate to the description of something else, as a secondary element of the poem, an incidental instrument of poetic reconstruction applied to something beyond the limits of the poet's emotional life. We might say that the mirror, in the small space it occupies in this book, only foreshadows a larger concept which Paz was to form at a later date.

Surveying the cases in which the mirror is used as an image in *Libertad bajo palabra,* we observe that there is one common denominator which stands out above all others: the vision of the mirror as an object which suggests absence of limits, an object which by definition is not subject to the usual laws of spatial measurement. "Atrás mis uñas y mis dientes caídos en el pozo del espejo," for example, suggests the irretrievable loss.

"Un olvido reciente y ya olvidado, espejo en un espejo" postulates the endless repetition of two mirrors reflecting each other. "Su propia soledad doblada: un desolado espejo negro" conveys the idea of solitude extended to infinite proportions. Repeatedly the image of the mirror involves the opening of a new dimension, a dimension of endlessness, spacelessness, so that its use here might be termed a kind of window into infinity:

Insomnio, espejo sin respuesta
Anegado en mi sombra-espejo
La conciencia, laberinto de espejos,
hipnótica mirada en sí misma abstraída
La noche nace en espejos de luto
El silencio es un espejo negro
donde se ahogan todas las preguntas
Adiós al espejo verídico,
donde dejé mi máscara
por descender al fondo del sinfín
Mas a solas de pronto
un espejo, unos ojos, un silencio,
precipicios abrían, inflexibles

El mal sabor del mundo, el impasible,
abstracto abismo del espejo a solas

These passages also suggest that a look through the window into a dimension that is formless and timeless can only be disquieting to the subject. In some cases this uneasiness becomes a more extreme emotion, and the image of the mirror is used to suggest resentment, hostility, and fierceness. The poet's fear of the void is thus expressed in his antagonism towards the object which represents it. The poet wishes to "probar la soledad sin que el vinagre / haga torcer mi boca ni repita / mis muecas el espejo, ni el silencio / se erice con los dientes que rechinan," the night is filled with "espejos que combaten," or the sea is wrecked by its own "voraz espejo." It is not the concrete reflection in the mirror which is feared as destructive, but what the reflection does towards nullifying the poet's vision of his own identity and independent existence. "El espejo que soy me deshabita." Since what he sees furnishes no answer, but merely repeats a question or statement, the poet's attitude is one of hostility. In two cases where the mirror is not named but is implied, Paz declares: "Lo que devoras te devora, / tu víctima también es tu verdugo"; "Frente de mí yo mismo, devorado."

If it is true that the principal quality of the mirror as Paz sees it is infinite repetition, it is equally true that this repetition is never utilized to glorify the subject's vanity. There is never the slightest implication that the face in the mirror is an object of admiration. The person who looks in the mirror, on the contrary, rarely sees what we would expect him to see, and what is reflected to him, far from being a source of satisfaction and pleasure, is the cause of a variety of adverse reactions ranging from boredom through rejection to the deepest despair. The lack of any trace of narcissism in poetry which is constantly haunted by the appearance of the mirror is in itself distinctive and sets Paz apart from other writers such as Paul Valéry, a narcissist of the intellectual variety, or a newly popular Mexican contemporary of Paz, Guadalupe Amor, who frankly admits her narcissism in her fondness for mirrors.

What the image of the mirror constantly suggests here, then, is its use as an entry into a dimension of infinite repetition, which the poet frequently associates with a bottomless void and which is related to an emotional reaction of strife and violence. The mirror as repetition, as a world of its own, is not particularly illogical nor far removed from the realm of experience. Considerably less clear so far is the poet's reaction to this concept; the reader may find himself confused when he tries to determine why the mirror is disturbing to the poet. The possible cause of the restlessness, the feelings of violence, is not revealed in the imagery itself. The fuller symbolic significance of the mirror is reserved for several entire poems□or sizable sections of poems□where it appears as the theme. These do not contradict or amend the ideas which we have pointed out as characteristic of the mirror up to this point; they add the philosophical implications, particularly relating to the poet's vision of reality, which are too extensive to be summed up completely by the image alone.

Before turning to an analysis of the mirror as theme, we should note the significance of another theme which has a relationship to it, that dealing with Paz's concept of poetry. It is not due to caprice that "La poesía," the concluding poem of *A la orilla,* appears in a

revised form as the first poem of *Libertad bajo palabra*, the only item in these two collections of his verse which the author has chosen to honor by repetition. Throughout both books, indeed, there is a predominant concern for the form that the poems are taking in the author's mind; he gives us a picture of a man constantly aware of the demands of his craft while he is in the throes of creation. Part of this concern centers around the forging of a language which will express his personality, which he seems to view as a means of personal revelation more than as a literary medium. Even more important than this, perhaps, is his view of poetry as a source of order and meaning in a disordered world. To the extent that he succeeds in finding words to express himself, to that extent does he shape a part of life and control a segment of existence:

El arte opera con la vida real como Dios con
el tiempo.
No sólo da unidad a la vida dispersa, abandonada
a su propio
fluir o a los estrechos cauces en que el hombre
la encierra;
también le "pone un hasta aquí" a esa
inagotable marea.

The great reverence for the mission of poetry helps to explain the absence of the narcissistic variety of self-contemplation which has already been noted in the imagery. Just as the poet is not content with the appearances of the world as he finds it, so does he reject the first appearances of his own personality as superficial. If poetry must give order to life, it will seek what the face in the mirror *implies* rather than dwell on a description of it as it is. In fact, a self-centered interpretation of the face in the mirror would be incompatible with the poet's reverence for the aims of art.

It is particularly in reference to time□or rather to the suspension of time□that a transformation of reality is felt. This experience is what the poet treats in "Arcos," in which he looks at the process of artistic creation with a schizophrenic eye by identifying himself with the river of his own poetry. The river flows along, divides, and goes separate ways to find itself once again. Although the mirror is not mentioned, it is strongly implied in the poet's re flection of himself in the river of imagery. The idea of a somewhat mystic union with poetry, a union which suspends time, helps to clarify passages of the poem:

¿Quién canta en las orillas del papel?
Inclinado, de pechos sobre el río
de imágenes, me veo, lento y solo,
de mí mismo alejarme; oh letras puras,
constelación de signos, incisiones
en la carne del tiempo, ¡oh escritura,
raya en el agua!

Writing itself may be as fleeting as a line in the water, but the effect it achieves, "incisiones en la carne del tiempo" puts experience out of time's reach. This

immobilization of time, moreover, is involved in the paradox (a device which Paz is obviously fond of) which he suggests in "me veo, lento y solo, de mí mismo alejarme," a situation which would be impossible except in a timeless world. The same kind of magic is applied to the river, which also has paradoxical characteristics ("que se desliza y no transcurre") and which, like the poet, is in two places at once, leaving itself to find itself, just as the poet, not only here, but in other poems, leaves his identity to find it, most often with the aid of the mirror:

Voy entre verdores
enlazados, voy entre transparencias,
entre islas avanzo por el río,
por el río feliz que se desliza
y-no transcurre, liso pensamiento.
Me alejo de mí mismo, me detengo
sin detenerme en una orilla y sigo,
río abajo, entre arcos de enlazadas
imágenes, el río pensativo.
Sigo, me espero allá, voy a mi encuentro,
río feliz que enlaza y desenlaza
un momento de sol entre dos álamos,
en la pulida piedra se demora,
y se desprende de sí mismo y sigue,
río abajo, al encuentro de sí mismo.

The river of art, then, is not a reflection of life, but a distillation:

El arte no es un reflejo de la vida. Tampoco es solamente una profundización
de la vida, una visión más pura y limpia. Es algo más; limita el acontecer,
extrae del fluir de la vida unos cuantos minutos palpitantes y los inmoviliza,
sin matarlos.

This same impression of the blissful suspension of time which the poet feels when he is successful in achieving self-expression is also observable in "Delicia":

. . . naces, poesía, delicia,
y danzas, invisible, frente al hombre.
El presidio del tiempo se deshace.

The release from the domination of time, which the author continues to develop in the stanza following this, emerges in the concluding lines as the principal theme of the poem, and fully defines the nature of "delicia."

The poet's search is not always so well rewarded, and the references to his work are not always the reflection of satisfaction in his mission, as can be seen in "La poesía" and "Las palabras." Occasionally the poet finds poetry not a reward but a punishment, and his feelings indicate frustration, uncertainty, and disillusionment. Such is the case of "El sediento," in which the hopeful search for poetry ends in failure when the poet faces

reality. The reality here is of special interest to us because it takes the form of the mirror, and connotes the barriers of the poet's own personality which he feels he must break to attain his aims:

Por buscarme, Poesía,
en ti me busqué:
deshecha estrella de agua,
se anegó mi ser.
Por buscarte, Poesía,
en mí naufragué.
Después sólo te buscaba
por huir de mí:
¡espesura de reflejos
en que me perdí!
Mas luego de tanta vuelta
otra vez me vi:
el mismo rostro anegado
en la misma desnudez;
las mismas aguas de espejo
en las que no he de beber;
yen el borde del espejo
el mismo muerto de sed.

The thirst is the poet's desire to lose himself in poetry (see "Destino del poeta" for another variation on the theme of "Delicia"), the mirror is his hope of attainment (and his attainment of his hope) in his goal, and the conclusion is his forlorn objective glimpse of himself in the action of the search.

It is this consciousness of himself in the act of creation which unites the theme of poetry with the theme of the mirror, although not always as concretely as Paz has mingled them in "El sediento." There is a significant relationship between the two suggesting that perhaps they represent, not separate problems, but different aspects of the same problem□ perhaps the unique and gigantic problem in the case of Paz□which the poet is called upon to solve. Paz is probably aware in his discussion of Quevedo's poetry of the significance of this question for an understanding of his own work:

En los salmos y sonetos que forman las "Lágrimas de
un Penitente," Quevedo expresa la certidumbre de
que el poeta ya no es uno con sus creaciones: está
mortalmente dividido. Entre la poesía y el poeta, entre
Dios y el hombre, se opone algo muy sutil y muy
poderoso: la conciencia, y lo que es más significativo:
la conciencia de la conciencia, el narcisismo intelectual.
Quevedo expresa este estado demoníaco en dos versos:

las aguas del abismo
donde me enamoraba de mí mismo.

It is no coincidence that Paz uses the same term "abismo" to refer to his own search for himself, and that his comments here are in essence an exact paraphrase of "El sediento."

Continuing his discussion of Quevedo's poetry, Paz remarks that Quevedo is the first of modern poets to attribute a sinful content to "conciencia," not because it sins in imagination, but because it tries to sustain itself by itself, and, all alone, to satiate its thirst for the absolute. While Paz may not take the bitter and proud pleasure in "conciencia" which he finds in Quevedo, his attitude partakes of the same solitude, the same sin of isolation. When he declares "contemplo el combate que combato," or when he addresses poetry to say "Insiste, vencedora, /porque tan sólo existo porque existes," he is simply bearing witness to the lucidity, almost unbearable in its brightness, of his sense of awareness. As was true in the case of his tribute to poetry, here too the mirror serves as a link between his ideas:

Romperé los espejos, haré trizas mi imagen□que
cada mañana rehace piadosamente mi cómplice, mi
delator□. La soledad de la conciencia y la conciencia
de la soledad, el día a pan y agua, la noche sin agua.
Sequía, campo arrasado por un sol sin párpados, ojo
atroz, oh conciencia, presente puro donde pasado y
porvenir arden sin fulgor ni esperanza. Todo desemboca
en esta eternidad que no desemboca.

When the poet is confronted with his awareness of the world, which he tries to view objectively, he ends by asking himself where reality lies. The nature of the question is such that only a paradox can be the answer. "Epitafio para un poeta" at first glance is mere word play, but in fact contains a rather profound riddle:

Quiso cantar, cantar
para olvidar
su vida verdadera de mentiras
y recordar
su mentirosa vida de verdades.

The clue to the riddle is found in his article, "Poesía de la soledad y poesía de comunión." Quevedo, Paz finds, refuses salvation and denies the grace of poetry because he is absorbed in the world. "Nada me desengaña, / el mundo me ha hechizado" are lines written by Quevedo which introduce *A la orilla del mundo*. Paz notes that Quevedo rejects redemption because he is absorbed in appearances:

Y es que no sólo la hermosura vacía del mundo
lo sujeta (ni es ella a la que se abraza, en todos

los sentidos y con todos los sentidos), sino su
conciencia de sí.

This statement recalls the concluding lines of "Insomnio" :

Insomnio, espejo sin respuesta,
páramo del desprecio,
pozo de sangre ardiente,
orgullosa conciencia ante sí misma.

It is no wonder, then, given the power of selfawareness and of all that it implies, that Paz's poetry is frequently characterized by anguish, by striving, by unfulfillment, and occasional glimpses of his own kind of paradise. Significantly, Paz uses the mirror to explain what the poet represents in relation to the grace of poetry and the pain of perception:

La poesía es inocencia, pero el poeta no es inocente.
De allí su angustia. La poesía es una gracia, un don,
pero también es una sed y un padecimiento. La poesía
brota del dolor como el agua de la tierra. Con la poesía
el poeta recobra la inocencia, recuerda el Paraíso
Perdido y come de la manzana antigua. Pero,¡qué
duros páramos, qué desiertos, hay que atravesar para
llegar a la fuente! Una fuente que a veces es sólo un
espejo resplandeciente y cruel, en el que el poeta
se contempla, sin saciarse, sin hundirse, reflejado
por una luz impía. El poeta es una conciencia: la
baudeleriana "conciencia del pecado," la conciencia
de la embriaguez, la reflexión del vértigo. La conciencia
de la existencia. Y de su conciencia brota, no la
ceguera ni el abandono, sino una más profunda lucidez,
que le permite contemplar y ser contemplado, ser el
delirio y la conciencia del delirio.

This too helps to explain what might seem the chaos of lines such as the following:

Vuelvo el rostro: no soy sino la estela
de mí mismo, la ausencia que deserto,
el eco del silencio de mi grito.

The concluding portion of "Envío" states the same idea with a cool intensity ("ardor helado"), which serves to heighten the effect of a metaphysical mystery. Paz treats this theme more fully and dramatically in "La calle":

Todo está oscuro y sin salida,
y doy vueltas y vueltas en esquinas
que dan siempre a la calle
donde nadie me espera ni me sigue,

donde yo sigo a un hombre que tropieza
y se levanta y dice al verme: nadie

"Encuentro" in *Águila o sol* is a prose variation of the same subject.

Seen in connection with the poet's pain of awareness, the device of the mirror acquires philosophical connotations: it is the symbol of the con- flict between his general quest (the search for the absolutes) and his subjective point of view (the knowledge of his own limitations). It is also the point of conflict between the poet's reverence for the mission of poetry in general and his dissatisfaction with the way in which he has chosen to express himself. It is as if Paz held up his written words to see himself reflected in them. The mirror, basically, is Paz's poetry and at the same time, his reaction to his poetry.

This reaction, which can be noted particularly in the poems which have the mirror as a theme, is the source of the dimension of endless repetition and the violence associated with it, which are inexplicable when the mirror images are seen alone. The mirror constitutes an infinity in that it is only through the presentation of an endless series of perspectives in his poetry that the poet can orient his search for an ultimate objective view of reality. Yet he must start his search with himself since he is the only reality he knows. The violence is a result of his frustration at not getting beyond himself in his search, for what he invariably sees is a picture of the poet observing the poet observing the reflection.

There are several entire poems in *Libertad bajo palabra* which are especially significant for a study of the poet's vision of himself. These are, in addition to some already referred to in the preceding pages, "El prisionero," "Insomnio," "El espejo," "Pregunta," "La caída," the sixth part of "Crepúsculo de la ciudad," "Medianoche," "La calle," and the fourth part of "Cuarto de hotel." In four of these the mirror is specifically mentioned as the source of the reflected image; in the others it is strongly implied. What they all have in common, as a point of departure for the development of the theme, is that the poet uses a reflection of himself as a means of probing the meaning of reality.

It is interesting to note that in all cases the poet does not use the mirror at the outset of the poem. There is an introduction□varying from several words to several paragraphs□before the actual appearance and recognition of the reflection. This gradual approach to the dominant idea has the effect of increasing the impact and heightens the drama of the confrontation when it actually occurs. The meeting takes place without any strong break in the association of ideas, so that the reader suddenly becomes aware, with the same surprise that the poet himself must feel, that another identity, perhaps unbidden, has made an appearance. The passage from "Cuarto de hotel" is representative of all the poems under discussion in the way it slips into the question of dual identity easily, casually, and passively:

Roza mi frente con sus manos frías
el río del pasado y sus memorias
huyen bajo mis párpados de piedra.
No se detiene nunca su carrera

y yo, desde mí mismo, lo despido.
¿Huye de mí el pasado?
¿Huyo con él y aquel que lo despide
es una sombra que me finge, hueca?
Quizá no es él quien huye; . . . .

At first we are told only that the poet is evoking memories; a chain of them which he reviews in his mind's eye. In the second sentence, the poet makes a separation of himself from the procession of memories (a separation which is indispensable for what is to follow, but which suggests nothing more so far than his awareness that there is a part of him which is not actively engaged in the process of evocation). In the question which follows, the separation between memory and himself is sharpened and made more concrete, but as yet does not involve a second personality. But in the next question□and the transition is made even smoother by the parallelism of the form□a subtle but vital change has been effected: the poet has shifted his point of view. Instead of seeing his memories from the vantage point of his consciousness, he has now identified himself with the memories themselves□but without submerging his voluntary consciousness completely, so that he now looks back at the person who was viewing the spectacle. What follows is a perfectly logical and rational doubt, and an implied debate as to the real identity of the poet: "Aquel que fuí se queda en la ribera. / No me recuerda nunca, ni me busca." We have, therefore, been led into the problem somewhat unawares. The poet has begun with a perfectly rational and normal set of circumstances and without our realizing it, has entered the realm of the abstract, a confused world where the standard concepts of reality do not always apply.

In this poem we have observed that the poet's vision of himself is obtained when he identifies himself with his recollections, and that he sees a shadow imitating him. In "La calle," the same sort of subtle change of vantage point is made with the same effect: the poet sees himself as he had described himself a moment before. In "El sediento," after becoming lost in a forest of reflections, the poet finds himself again: "y en el borde del espejo / el mismo muerto de sed." This, the final line of the poem, is particularly interesting, for it signifies that the poet has repeated in objective terms the same desires which he described at the beginning of the poem in very subjective terms. In "Envío" the process we have noted is reversed; instead of proceeding from the subjective view of himself to the objective, he begins with the objective ("Alguien escribe en mí") and concludes with the return to himself ("y vuelve a ser yo mismo"). The general impression, however, is the same: the poet sees himself as another person in his own situation ("Con un ardor helado /contempla lo que escribo"). In "Arcos" ("Sigo, me espero allá, / voy a mi encuentro"), the same situation is repeated, as it is somewhat less clearly in "La caída" ("El espejo que soy me deshabita") and as it is very clearly in "Pregunta," "El espejo," and "El prisionero ."

What Paz sees first, then, is a new dimension of his personality □we might call it his unconscious self□which he reveals to us in the contrast between subjective and objective description, and with the exception of "Insomnio" and of "Crepúsculo de la ciudad," all the poems we are discussing here return the image of the poet in the act of observing his image, thus giving an unusual depth of perspective.

There is, of course, a basic paradox here, which Paz has not failed to develop for its poetic effect. For how is it possible for the poet to be at the same time the observer and the observed, the victim and the executioner, the departing one and the person to whom he says farewell?

Estoy con uno como yo,
que no me reconoce y me muestra mis armas;
con uno que me abraza y me hiere
□y se dice mi hijo□;
con uno que huye con mi cuerpo;
con uno que me odia porque yo soy él mismo.

"La caída" summarizes the paradox of the reflection when the poet writes "Frente de mí yo mismo, devorado" and "El espejo que soy me deshabita." Unusual definitions of paradoxical situations are found in the concluding stanza of "Envío":

Pero este juez también es víctima
y al condenarme, se condena:
no escribe a nadie, a nadie llama,
a sí mismo se escribe, en sí se olvida,
y se rescata, y vuelve a ser yo mismo . . .
and in "Crepúsculo de la ciudad" :
Vuelvo el rostro: no soy sino la estela
de mí mismo, la ausencia que deserto,
el eco del silencio de mi grito.

Many more examples, not only in the poems built around the mirror, but throughout Paz's work, indicate that he takes pleasure in the exploitation of the paradox. In the case of the mirror, we should add that this device is a fundamental aspect of the poet's vision of himself. It is an organic part of the reflection in the mirror because Paz sees, not a repetition of the same thing in isolation, but a different aspect of reality, and not only a different perspective, but an opposite one:

todo lo que contemplo me contempla
y soy al mismo tiempo fruto y labio
y lo que permanece y lo que huye.

The paradox at first seems an insoluble riddle, for how can one person be two opposing things at the same time? In the real world of events, in life ruled by an inescapable chronology, there would be no answer, but in the dreamlike world of the mirror, time does not exist, at least not in the form in which we know it. In one passage, as applicable to the question of reality as it is to the question of time, we read: "¿ Y somos esa imagen que soñamos, / sueños al tiempo hurtados, / sueños del tiempo por burlar al tiempo?" Lines which Paz wrote for the sixth part of "Cuarto de hotel" could be applied to the mirror:

No hay antes ni después. ¿ Lo que viví
lo estoy viviendo todavía?
¡Lo que viví! ¿Fuí acaso? Todo fluye:
lo que viví lo estoy muriendo todavía.
No tiene fin el tiempo: . . . .

Like Paz's concept of poetry, the mirror is a world without time (here we are reminded of the Surrealists, who have capitalized on the abolition of limits of time and space), where it is completely appropriate for two opposites to be viewed in conjunction.

As an illustration of the poet's reaction to what he sees in the mirror, the major portion of "Pregunta" is particularly revealing. The first lines of the poem, with the deliberate confusion regarding the identity of the being the poet is addressing, lead up to the presentation of the vision:

Déjame, sí, déjame, dios o ángel, demonio.
Déjame a solas, turba angélica,
solo conmigo, con mi multitud.

The fact that the same thing can be taken as a god or angel, devil and angelic throng, the paradoxical statement of the poet's being alone with himself and alone with his multitude, prepare us for the dualities which are to follow.

The second stanza is the confrontation "Estoy con uno como yo," which we have already discussed above. The stanza which follows describes Paz's usual reaction to the image in the mirror:

Mira, tú que huyes,
aborrecible hermano mío,
tú que enciendes las hogueras terrestres,
tú, el de las islas y el de las llamaradas,
mírate y dime:
ese que corre,
ese que alza lenguas y antorchas
para llamar al cielo□y lo quema□;
ese que vive entre las aguas,
en un pedazo oscuro de tierra deliciosa;
ese que es una estrella lenta que desciende;
aquel que es como un arma resonante,
¿ es el tuyo, tu ser, hecho de horas
y voraces minutos?

The question which introduces the fourth stanza is a logical outgrowth of the preceding one. What the poet has seen, we have pointed out, is another facet of his own personality. "¿Quién sabe lo que es un cuerpo / un alma, /y el sitio en que se juntan?" This question, unanswered, leads to still another: "¿Y somos esa imagen que soñamos, / sueños al tiempo hurtados, sueños del tiempo por burlar al tiempo?" The three

questions, all centering around the identity of the reflection, might be reworded, resorting to oversimplification, as follows: Is he my soul? Who knows what body and soul are? Are they both unreal?

This question of identity, the reaction to the vision in the mirror, is primarily an intellectual matter, a rational inquiry, but its secondary effect on an emotional level is one of acute anguish:

Muros, objetos, cuerpos te repiten.
¡Todo es espejo!
Tu imagen te persigue.
El hombre está habitado por silencio y vacío.
¿Cómo saciar esta hambre,
cómo acallar este silencio y poblar su vacío?
¿Cómo escapar a mi imagen?
Sólo en mi semejante me trasciendo . . .

Frequently the question asserts emptiness, as it almost does in "Pregunta" above. Or again:

¿ qué soy, sino la sima en que me abismo,
y qué, si no el no ser, lo que me puebla?
El espejo que soy me deshabita;
un caer en mí mismo inacable
al horror de no ser me precipita.
And again:
Hacia mí mismo voy; hacia las mudas,
solitarias fronteras sin salida:
duras aguas, opacas y desnudas,
horadan lentamente mi conciencia
y van abriendo en mí secreta herida,
que mana sólo, estéril, impaciencia.

In another poem the poet wonders if he is alone in time, if he is only time: "¿Soy un llegar a ser que nunca llega?" One of the concluding sections of "Pregunta," immediately following the three questions, sums up the extreme discomfort the interrogations have brought about, a discomfort expressed, logically enough, in terms of self-inflicted hurt:

En soledad pregunto,
a soledad pregunto.
Y rasgo mi boca amante de palabras
y me arranco los ojos
henchidos de mentiras y apariencias,
y arrojo lo que el tiempo
deposita en mi alma,

miserias deslumbrantes,
ola que se retira . . . .

What does the questioning lead to? What answer does the poet find? The conclusions he draws in "El espejo" are the conclusions of all the poems with the mirror as a theme:

y entre los juegos fatuos del espejo
ardo y me quemo y resplandezco y miento
un yo que empuña, muerto,
una daga de humo que le finge
la evidencia de sangre de la herida,
y un yo, mi yo penúltimo,
que sólo pide olvido, sombra, nada,
final mentira que lo enciende y quema.
De una máscara a otra
hay siempre un yo penúltimo que pide.
Y me hundo en mí mismo y no me toco.

This is equivalent to an admission of failure, to a certain extent, failure at least in an inability to determine the nature of reality. The reflection is false, and after observing it carefully, the poet feels that what it reflects is false too. Both then are masks, as he has declared above. "Y entre espejos impávidos un rostro / me repite a mi rostro, un rostro / que enmascara a mi rostro." He ends up being a reflection of a reflection. Yet with all this, in spite of the rejection of both faces, of all the faces that he may see, the poet is aware of his own observation and of his own unsatisfied need for something else. Between one mask and another, "hay siempre un yo penúltimo que pide," which asserts the existence of the "último yo," the object of his search.

The mirror illustrates, in its connection with reality, an idea fundamental for all of Paz's poetry: the pursuit of the absolute, which frequently leads to feelings of anguish at its unattainment. What underlies the majority of his poems, analogous to his search for his true reflection in the mirror, is a desire to define the subject with which he is dealing. Definition seems to involve, first, a rejection of the appearances, and then a simplification, a stripping away of superfluous attributes, in an impassioned effort to arrive at the heart of things. Finally, the poet in most cases is left with the feeling of frustration that comes when he sees that somehow there is a reality beyond his reach.

Whether he is dealing with a chair, the Mexican landscape, or love, Paz cannot help but be an abstractionist in his treatment of the topic. This does not mean generalizing, so that he attempts to write about all chairs, all the landscape, all love, but rather to find the essence of his own vision of the subject. If it can be found, he seems to say, in it will be found the common ground which is universality. For all of his vision of reality, as for his search in the mirror, his aim is to find an absolute value□not so much in himself as *through* himself.

Quite clearly the goal has not been attained in his poems dealing with the mirror. The reality he seeks usually concludes in the nothingness the poet feels at the conclusion of "El espejo" and which in another poem, he has described in similar terms:

Adiós al espejo verídico,
donde dejé mi máscara
por descender al fondo del sinfín
(y nunca descendía:
¿ no tienes fondo, sólo superficie?)

It is the same negative result that gives rise to another thought which occurs several times to the poet: perhaps we do not exist even in the form that we imagine we exist in:

olvidos que alimentan la memoria,
que ni nos pertenecen ni llamamos,
sueños del sueño, súbitas presencias
con las que el tiempo dice que no somos,
que es él quien se recuerda y él quien sueña.

An interesting parallel to this concept of man as related to idea is found in the work of Paul Valéry, who was also fascinated by the mirror. Valéry, too, suggested that it is not the self that finds the idea, but the idea that adopts the self. The similarity between the two writers, moreover, does not end there; the mirror, as a method of encouraging complication in order to think better, is a token of a great area of thought which the two have in common. Like Paz, Valéry had moments of annoyance with the defectiveness of words and the meaning they convey; like Paz, too, and as the title of Elizabeth Sewell's interesting study indicates, Valéry was bewitched by the sight of his own mind in action: "Je suis étant et me voyant, me voyant me voir."

There is at least one notable difference between the two, however. Paz probably would agree with Valéry that we have the faculty of producing an inner antagonism against ourselves. In Paz, however, it is produced, not while looking at his image in the mirror, but before, and it is the frustration of not being able to overcome it which takes the form of resentment against the image in the mirror. Hence when Valéry speaks of the mind vibrating in an infinity of mirrors, he is speaking of creation and movement, of a pleasurable sensation. The same image for Paz is one of frustration, limitation, and anguish.

Although Paz's only firm conclusion after looking in the mirror is a negative one, the certainty of nothingness, we may well suspect that he seeks certainty of a different kind. The thirst for eternity which torments him seldom appears in his poetry in positive form. One of these few cases of blissful longing occurs in "Himno entre ruinas," the concluding poem of *Libertad bajo palabra:*

La inteligencia al fin encarna en formas,
se reconcilian las dos mitades enemigas
y la conciencia-espejo se licúa,

vuelve a ser fuente, manantial de fábulas:
Hombre, árbol de imágenes,
palabras que son flores que son frutos que
son actos.

Some lines of William Butler Yeats, from a poem which is not particularly metaphysical ("Before the World Was Made"), perhaps provide a definition of Paz's goal:

From mirror after mirror,
No vanity's displayed.
I'm looking for the face I had
Before the world was made.

Paz's search in the mirror, then, is a search typical of 20th-century man. It is paradoxical, as many of Paz's ideas are, that the more personal his search becomes, the more it acquires characteristics of the universal. This is not the unfathomable, intricate labyrinth of the ego that we often find in the Surrealists, but a search that concerns many men of today's world.

Source: John M. Fein, "The Mirror as Image and Theme in the Poetry of Octavio Paz," in *Symposium,* Vol. X, No. 2, Fall, 1956, pp. 251-70.

Adaptations

The Nobel Committee maintains a page on Paz that includes a bibliography of his works and useful links to other sites at http://www.nobel.se/ laureates/literature-1990.html.

Topics for Further Study

Research the creation myths of various cultures and note their similarities and differences. Does the idea of a "golden age" of paradise figure prominently in many of these myths?

Examine the surrealist movement in literature and art. What particular techniques do surrealist artists use to express their ideas in visual form and in using the written word?

Write an essay about what you view to be the possibilities and limits of language when it comes to expressing ideas. Do you think poetry can communicate complex ideas better than prose? Why or why not?

Investigate the ancient Mexican practice of sun worship and discuss why the sun was considered sacred in ancient agrarian Mexican societies.

Compare and Contrast

1910: Only one percent of the Mexican population holds ninety percent of the land. More than ninety-seven percent of the rural poor own no land at all.

1934: The Mexican government begins a major program of land distribution to farmers.

1999: A group of farmers and other protesters ride on horseback to Mexico City to publicize the plight of Mexican farmers, who have become indebted to large banks. Authorities block their way and repress the march all along its route.

Today: In the United States, particularly in California, American farmers hire illegal Mexican immigrants to work as laborers at low wages.

1936-39: Volunteers from around the world, from Mexico to the United States to Britain, join the Loyalists to defend the left-wing cause against General Franco's forces in Spain.

1975: Franco dies after almost four decades as ruler of Spain.

1978: The Spanish people approve by an eightyeight- percent majority the new constitution, which defines Spain as a parliamentary monarchy.

1982: The Spanish people elect a socialist government by an overwhelming majority.

2000: The right-wing Popular Party wins an outright majority in the Spanish general election. Meanwhile, in the U.S., the socialist presence in political life is minimal. The dominant forces in the political landscape are, as they have been since the establishment of the nation, the Democratic and Republican Parties.

1924: The surrealist movement is born with André Breton's publication of the *Manifesto of Surrealism*.

1950s: The pop-art movement begins in Britain and the United States. It uses the images and techniques of mass media, advertising, and popular culture, often in an ironic way.

1960s: The primarily Latin American literary movement called magical realism arises. Magical realist writers mingle realistic portrayals of events and characters with elements of fantasy and myth, creating a world that is at once familiar and dreamlike.

Today: The late-twentieth-century postmodernist movement is popular among left-leaning academic intellectuals in the United States. The movement, which grew out of a movement in architecture, eschews definition and touches on a range of subjects, including literary criticism and cultural theory. One of its aims is to destabilize the myth of fixed meaning in language.

What Do I Read Next?

The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico (*El labertino de la soledad*, 1950) is Paz's powerful nonfiction work that contains elements of autobiography, literary criticism, and social commentary. The book probes Mexican identity by examining the nature of political power in Mexico after the Spanish conquest as well as the relation of Native Americans to Europeans.

In his lecture given upon receiving the Nobel Prize in 1990, entitled "In Search of the Present," Paz discusses language, history, myth, and poetry. He speaks about the bridge between tradition and modernity as new life is constantly breathed into antiquity, and also of his "pilgrimage in search of modernity" that led to a recognition of the "real time" of the present.

A Tale of Two Gardens: Poems from India 1952- 1995 collects the poetry from over forty years of Paz's relationship with India□as ambassador, student of Indian philosophy and mythology, and poet.

Joseph Campbell discusses the primitive roots of mythology, examining them in light of discoveries in archaeology, anthropology, and psychology in *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (1968). His *Hero of a Thousand Faces* (1949) explores the world's interwoven mythology and sees their common themes as indicating distinctly human reactions to the riddles of life.

Paz's early poems, with their elements of eroticism, political questioning, and surrealism, are well represented in *Early Poems: 1935-1955*, which are translated and collected by the American poets William Carlos Williams, Muriel Rukeyser, Denise Levertov and others. Paz's later poetic visions are beautifully rendered by the poet Elizabeth Bishop in *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz, 1957-1987*.

Further Study

Chiles, Frances, *Octavio Paz: The Mythic Dimension*, Peter Lang, 1986, 224 p.

Study of myth and mythmaking in Paz's poetry based on an analysis of the central theme of solitude versus communion.

Duran, Manuel, "Octavio Paz: The Poet as Philosopher," in *World Literature Today: A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma*, Vol. 56, No. 4, Autumn, 1982, pp. 591-94.

Duran writes that Paz belongs to a select group of poets "who can expand the limits of poetry until they invade the realm of philosophy."

Ivask, Ivar, ed., *The Perpetual Present: The Poetry and Prose of Octavio Paz*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1973, 160 p.

A collection of essays on a variety of subjects in Paz's poetry, including water imagery, the concept of universalism, irony and sympathy, the status of the reader, and the use of images.

Quiroga, Jose, *Understanding Octavio Paz*, University of South Carolina, 1999, 194 p.

A study of Paz with regard to his literary and historical position, emphasizing his earlier work.

Wilson, Jason, *Octavio Paz: A Study of his Poetics*, Cambridge University Press, 1979, 192 p.

Wilson explores Paz's affinities with André Breton's surrealism as the basis for Paz's vision of the poet and poem.

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Phillips, Rachel, *The Poetic Modes of Octavio Paz*, Oxford University Press, 1972, 168 p.

Weinberger, Eliot, editor, *Octavio Paz: Selected Poems*, New Directions, 1984, 147 p.

Wilson, Jason, *Octavio Paz*, Twayne Publishers, 1986, 165 p.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) 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, LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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

LDNfS 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 Literature of Developing Nations 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 LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS 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.

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