Fading Light Study Guide

Fading Light by Robert Creeley

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Introduction

Robert Creeley's poem "Fading Light," originally published in a 1988 collection of poems titled *Windows*, was republished in 2001 in *Just in Time*, which contains the entire contents of three of Creeley's earlier collections. These poems illustrate the themes and styles with which the poet engaged himself as he approached the age of seventy. Thus it represents a mature effort of a poet who has been writing since his late twenties. The poem is short, only twelve lines long, and its line length is somewhat more extended than in most of his poems. Many of Creeley's poems are short, sometimes so short that they achieve comprehensibility only as part of a longer cluster of poems. The typical Creeley poem tends to be a sinewy stream of words on a mostly white page. Indeed, for a poet who often places a single word, sometimes a word as simple as "the" to stand alone as a line, his lines in this poem mark a minor stylistic shift. "Fading Light" is a poem that begins with a very simple image□an image of dusk seen through an open window□a commonplace, almost impersonal image that is transformed from perception into reflection on time and memory, all in an austere, remote style, one in which the diction is kept spare and deliberately simple. Belying the simplicity of the diction, however, the poet uses a number of techniques to cause the work to be somewhat difficult to interpret in a first reading or hearing. The poem is punctuated as one sentence, but it is composed of fragments that are so deliberately, ambiguously constructed that the reader has to interpret where and how the different parts interact to create a meaningful whole. It is the difficulty in understanding what exactly is being said that causes a careful reader to attend to the diction, syntax, imagery, and sound of the poem.

Author Biography

Robert Creeley was born in Arlington, Massachusetts, on May 21, 1926, the son of a physician. In 1928, his left eye was injured in an accident, which resulted in blindness and eventual removal of the eye. His father died in 1932, leaving his mother overwhelmed with the responsibilities involved in liquidating his father's medical practice.

Creeley attended Harvard from 1943 to 1946, interrupted by a stint as an ambulance driver in India during World War II. He was not a diligent student and dropped out of Harvard during his senior year without receiving a degree. In 1950, he began a literary correspondence with Charles Olson, which proved beneficial to him. Creeley taught at Black Mountain College in North Carolina from 1954 to 1955, where he associated with a number of experimental poets and artists. Visiting San Francisco in 1956, he came to know a number of the Beat poets including Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Allen Ginsberg. During subsequent years Creeley taught at colleges in New Mexico, British Columbia, and California, before moving permanently to Buffalo, New York in 1966. His poems, however, do not show a sense of place, and critics have noticed that it is often very difficult to attach poems to biographical or geographical places in the poet's life.

In 1960, Creeley received the Levinson Prize for ten poems published in the May edition of *Poetry*. His work attracted critical acclaim and was anthologized in a number of influential collections such as A. Poulin's *Contemporary American Poetry* in 1980. From 1989 to 1991 he was the New York State Poet. Since 1989, he has taught poetry and humanities at the State University of New York, Buffalo. He won Yale's Bollingen Prize, one of America's most distinguished recognitions for poetry, in 1999. In September 2001, he was awarded the prestigious Lannan Lifetime Achievement Award for his works, a recognition that included a substantial financial reward. Creeley has published his work through major publishing houses, but much of it has also been issued in small editions by small presses and is difficult to locate. Fortunately, his works have been collected and reprinted in more extensive collections. "Fading Light" was reprinted in 2001 in the book *Just in Time*. He has given many interviews, some of which are reprinted in works by literary critics. Creeley has also issued recordings of himself reading his poetry and has influenced many poets who came of age in the 1970s.

Plot Summary

Lines 1—3

The very first line of "Fading Light" introduces several key aspects of the poem. The poem begins with an immediate, emphatic "Now," followed by an impersonal "one" who could be the poet himself or, indeed, anyone, a pronoun that is followed by "might catch" in which the possibility of seizing a moment is at once asserted and then immediately questioned. Terry R. Bacon has remarked that "Creeley's poetry is expressed in the perpetual NOW. It is a 'real time' rendering, in a very solipsistic sense, of the universe he perceives." The title of poem has helped to establish that the poem is about dusk, and it is this moment of dusk to which the poet directs attention, as though perception could freeze the moment into something palpable. Creeley repeats verbs, as he will do throughout the poem□"catch it see it." His refusal to punctuate conventionally or to add connective words such as "and" begins a pattern of disjointed phrases marked by verbs that are connected elusively to their grammatical subject. The reader, indeed, must supply the subjects and make sense of the phrasing in order to make this poem meaningful.

The transition from the first line to the second line demonstrates that Creeley will use the poetic technique of enjambment in this poem. Enjambment occurs when a line's sense continues into the next line, with no pause. Commonly, lines that are not enjambed, which are called end-stopped lines, have some kind of punctuation, such as a comma, period, or dash, to show the reader that a pause is necessary. Enjambed lines, on the other hand, rush onward, usually to find a pause in the middle or end of a subsequent line. All the lines except the last one in this poem are enjambed. Interestingly, Creeley says in the interview included in *Just in Time*, "I read the breaks." Thus, in his own reading, the poet would pause at the end of lines, whereas the meaning of the lines clearly demands that one go on into the next line. While there may be other interpretations, there seems to be a pause after the first "it," in the first line, with a second pause after the word "shift." Thus, the natural reading of the first line seems to go over into the second, and would be punctuated thus: "Now one might catch it, see it shift . . ." That the poet does not write it as it would be spoken is a clue that his intent is to frustrate the reader's uncritical expectations.

The second line repeats the uncertainty of the first. The "it," which we infer to be the fading light of the title, is "almost substantial blue," teetering just outside the poet's certain grasp. The light is indeterminate, being "blue / white yellow light." The jumble of adjectives will be paralleled later in the poem by a heaping of verbs and adverbs. All of this is deliberately confusing, but the confusion in syntax is related to the confusion in perception. The light is fading, indeterminate, of changing color and quality, and the concepts and recollections about to occur in the poem are similar in their elusiveness.

Lines 4—6

The reader has to supply the connections between the subject and the various verbs of the poem. While one might fairly easily interpret that one might "see it shift . . . become intense definition," the word "think," which is characteristically poised at the end of a line, is a verb without a clear subject. Perhaps Creeley is telling readers that one might "catch it" and one might "think / of the spinning world." Here, there is a transition from object to concept. Creeley has steadfastly tried to eliminate concepts and abstractions from his poetry, following the advice of the American poet William Carlos Williams, with whom the young Creeley corresponded and who is credited with the poetic slogan "no concepts but in objects." The spinning world is something, however, that has to be thought about, not directly perceived. This shift starts to take the poem beyond sight into what lies beyond.

Readers see the abstractions and ambiguities become more apparent as the poem progresses. The "of the spinning world is it as" is very easy to stumble over when reading aloud. Perhaps Creeley wants readers to read his words as "think of the spinning world. Is it as ever?" The answer is not obvious, and in struggling for a resolution to the demands of the tortured syntax, perhaps the poet makes his point. The fading light is hard to catch, and the meaning is hard to catch, and it may be the reader who has to supply the meaning that the world and the poet fail to make clear. A striking image, "this plate of apparent life" contains both the abstract word "life" and the concrete word "plate" which will foreshadow "supper" in the penultimate line. By this point, the poem has gone beyond perception to asking questions about the world and about life. The world has changed, or why else would the poet seem to ask "is it as / ever?" Likewise "apparent" gives no clear direction to "life"; it merely seems to undercut the solidity of life. Everything Creeley says, he seems to contradict.

Lines 7—12

Suddenly there is a different kind of shift, occurring as usual right before the end of a line. The poet says "hold on / chute the sled plunges down ends / down the hill . . ." It is as though he puts some motion into the middle of a deliberately confused situation, and the reader speeds up and reads, right after the word "patient" about a chute and a sled plunging down. The word "down" is repeated three times in two lines. "Patient" is used twice, once in the middle of the poem and once in the last line. Additionally, Creeley uses "time" twice within three lines. This repetition and quickening pace push the poem to its conclusion. Memories, triggered by the fading light of the poem's title, start rushing out like objects down a chute, like a sled rushing down a snowy hill in winter. In keeping with the indeterminate, contradictory nature of this poem, this rush is juxtaposed with the repeated word "patient."

Thom Gunn has said that as Creeley has matured as a poet "the book rather than the individual poem becomes the meaningful unit." It might be useful to note at this point that this poem was placed near the end of a book titled *Windows* and is immediately

adjacent to other poems that are clearly observations of the world through windows of various sorts. A poem on the facing page is titled "Echo" and talks of weather that is grey and cold. The darkness, the sled, the position next to other winter poems all make "Fading Light" a winter reverie. The fading light is a real event outside a literal window, and the poet observes the ways the colors shift at dusk, and he thinks of the passage of time and life, which seems like a plunging sled going downhill to the "field's darkness" but, back inside, "supper here left years behind waits." The vision of light fading into darkness triggers in the poet memories of suppers years before, and yet he does not act, but "patient in mind remembers the time."

In this poem, Creeley plays with language so that readers'observations of reality are brought into question, so that they can think mindfully about the things of the world. On the other hand, it is reasonable to notice that this is a poem written by a man who is entering old age, that the "fading light" may also be the fading energy and life force of the writer. It would be very much like Creeley to hide any personal reference in wordplay and tortured syntax. In this reading of the poem, Creeley recognizes that even the fading light is transitory and ephemeral, that the world continues to spin, and that what is ultimately left to him in the face of death is a patient holding on and a looking back as his life's story rushes on faster and faster.

Themes

Uncertainty

One of the significant themes of this poem is uncertainty. Just as the fading light of dusk makes clear vision impossible, the words of this poem emphasize the uncertainty of perception and memory. Starting with the first line's "one might catch it," the poem contains constant repeated references to uncertainty. The "almost substantial" light, which is "blue / white yellow" is of indeterminate color and materiality. Life itself is but "apparent" life, nothing palpable and direct, but vague and indeterminate. Near the end of the poem a sled goes "down the hill beyond sight down / into field's darkness." Nothing certain can be asserted about what happens in that darkness.

Impersonality

Creeley does not say that these events and perceptions occurred to him. Neither does he create a persona, a voice of another character, who tells his own story to a reader. Some of the most significant themes of impersonality occur at very strategic places in the poem, in the first and last lines. It is "one" who might perceive this light. The experience is a common one. Everyone, except for the blind, has experienced fading light at dusk. It is quite significant that the poet does not say that "I" might have seen this light, but that "one," which represents the self as well as the universal consciousness, might have seen the light. Although Creeley does sometimes include himself in his own poems, he usually writes deliberately subdued poems in common diction, taking the focus off the poet and putting it into the words and images. In the middle of the poem he uses the phrase "makes all sit patient." This is an ambiguous and impersonal word, which can be interpreted as "it makes all persons patient" or, alternatively, "it makes me all patient." A less careful poet would probably give the reader one possible interpretation. Finally, at the end of the poem, "patient in mind remembers the time" does not say whose mind is doing the remembering. On the one hand, it can be the poet's own memory, but he does not say that it is his. On the other hand, while a memory must be someone's memory, the universality of the experience, indeed, its mundane character, suggest that it is someone's memory, and perhaps everyone's memory. It is through an impersonal description of optical and mental events that the poet tries to link his own perceptions with those of his audience.

Memory

This is a poem that ends up inside the poet's (or is it the reader's?) head. In the middle of the poem we find a shift from the immediate occasion of the work, which is a vision of dusk, presumably a winter dusk seen through a window, to a series of meditations and memories. At the end of the fifth line Creeley introduces an unpunctuated question: "is it as / ever this plate of apparent life / makes all sit patient . . ." Here he ties the present to

the recurring past. He also seems to evoke a memory from childhood, sitting patient and waiting for supper to be served. This memory is more likely from childhood than from adulthood in that children are often hungry and impatient to be served, whereas adults are more in control of the food and the supper ritual. He also uses words such as "chute" and "sled," which seem to allude to a New England childhood. The chute is a coal chute, and coal was often burned to heat buildings seventy years ago, and of course the sled is only used in a snowy climate. The sled is an apparatus of childish pleasure, and Creeley most likely has a particular hill in mind and a particular dark field from his childhood, though he does not identify any of them for his readers. Finally comes supper, but this is not a supper awaiting the poet in the present; rather, it is a memory of "supper here left years behind." And by the last lines of his poem, the poet makes it extremely obvious that he has gone back into memory when he concludes by saying, "patient in mind remembers the time."

Mortality and Anxiety

It is important to remember that this is a poem by a man approaching old age. Like many modernist writers, Creeley does not take comfort in the promises of traditional religion; there is no hope of heaven or redemption in his work. Death induces anxiety and insecurity for him. Anxiety is not totally negative, however, if it sharpens perceptions and leads to a cherishing of all the mundane events of daily life. For a poet who abhors simile, this work nevertheless employs something similar, a metaphor, which is an implied comparison between two dissimilar things. The fading light of the title can be compared to the waning life force of any person. Always one to eschew melodrama, Creeley makes his poem impersonal and universal. Everyone is fated to die. Death is, simultaneously and paradoxically, both the most personal and the most impersonal of fates. The impersonality of this poem, its uncertainty, and its lapse into early memory all find a culmination in the poem's overriding existential concern, which is the poet's confrontation with anxiety and his own mortality.

Style

Diction

At first the diction of the poem seems unremarkable. There are no odd, unusual, or difficult words. A careless reader might not even think of noticing the diction, but that would be a mistake. Creeley has very consciously picked out words that do not call attention to themselves. There has long been a struggle in American writing between stylists who utilize uncommon diction and unusual imagery and those, like Creeley, who try to use common speech. This struggle goes back centuries, hearkening back to the English Civil War and the elaborate and erudite poetry of the cavaliers on the one hand, and the sturdy and direct Puritan texts on the other. Creeley has enlisted the banner of plain speech and straightforward expression.

Enjambment

The poet makes extensive use of the device of enjambment in this poem. Enjambment is the technique of continuing the sense of a line forward into the next one. It is to be contrasted with the end-stopped lines that are characteristic of much metered and formal poetry. In this poem the last word of every line, except for the last, leads the reader on into the subsequent line. There is no reason to pause at the end of each line, at least no reason that would lead to a comprehensible and natural reading of the poem. It is very apparent that Creeley deliberately enjambs each line in order to produce poetic effects. The first effect is that of a breathless tumbling into the images of the following lines. A second effect is to isolate subject from verb and to shatter phrases, isolating words in space at the end of the lines. In most enjambed poems, the technique makes for a more fluid and natural oral interpretation, but here the enjambment does just the opposite, calling attention to the artifice of the work.

Syntactic Suspension

Many poems do not resolve themselves until their concluding lines. This phenomenon is true of Shakespearean sonnets as well as this poem. What Creeley does that is distinctive here is to present a long "sentence" that is not a conventional sentence at all. Though expressed in common words, and containing elements of a sentence such as multiple verbs and associated phrases and clauses, and though it does hang together to make a comprehensible sequence of thoughts, it is not a prosaic expression, but a poem that uses the rules of language for an unconventional purpose. It is not until the very last phrase, "remembers the time," that the reader can see what the first line signifies, that the fading light of the title triggers a memory of supper years before. The poet suspends the syntax in several ways, using enjambment, lack of conventional punctuation, and omission of words that would help clarify the meaning, all to postpone

the reader's comprehension of his poem until the very last line. This syntactic suspension makes the poem challenging to interpret.

Historical Context

When Creeley published "Fading Light" in 1988, he was entering a phase of his career as a distinguished elder statesman of American poetry. Having gone to India during the 1940s, he had been associated with important creative writers at Black Mountain College, and later with the Beat poets. By the time he published this poem he, along with other formerly radical members of his generation, had become converted into fixtures of the poetic establishment. It is a familiar progression, from radical to tenured and respected professor, but by the late 1980s he, along with such luminaries as his old friends Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, had found themselves embraced by an establishment they had once opposed.

During the early days of Creeley's career, modernist formalism, epitomized by the work of W. H. Auden and T. S. Eliot, was at the center of American academic poetry. Things started changing rapidly during the late 1950s with the rise of confessional poets such as Robert Lowell, as well as the emergence of Creeley's Beat friends. The 1960s were anarchic in many ways. Frequently poets felt obliged to take political stances, but Creeley, though he sympathized with the anti—Vietnam War activists, did not employ his poetry as a political tool. By the 1980s, as this poem was written, the American poetry scene had fragmented into multiple segments, each with its own audience, purposes, publications, and venues.

One of the trends in American poetry when Creeley wrote this poem was the rise of a new type of academic poetry. It is true in some sense that much poetry has been academic, in that poets often are drawn to teaching, and good poets are sometimes rewarded with teaching positions at colleges, though William Carlos Williams was a practicing physician and Wallace Stevens had been a corporate attorney. But by the 1980s, the proliferation of creative writing programs in universities around the country had led to the rise of what poet Albert Goldbarth called "po-biz," in which recipients of graduate degrees in creative writing wrote books of poetry, reviewed the books of others in similar programs, and were rewarded with academic jobs and the occasional monetary prize. The increasingly academic direction of poetry coincided with a dramatic fall-off in the size of the poetry-reading public, as poets began to write primarily for small specialized audiences. Creeley had participated in the prototype of the master of fine arts programs back in his years at Black Mountain College. Though that school did not survive long, subsequent generations of aspiring poets went in the academic direction.

Another trend in the late 1980s was a countercurrent in poetry, the rise of a new formalism. Poetic tastes had veered from popular tastes; rhyme and meter seemed to have fallen out of favor sometime before the death of Robert Frost. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s free verse became the dominant form of poetry. Some of it could be superb, as Sylvia Plath at her best, but as poetry became easier to compose, it also could tend toward sentimentality, slackness, and narcissism. A number of poets returned to formal structures with new enthusiasm. Poets as different as Derek Walcott, Dana Gioia, Anne Stevenson, Donald Justice, and Seamus Heaney published new work in *The Formalist*, *The New Criterion*, and other places. A number of important

anthologies of formalist verse were published, and displayed a far different aesthetic intent than does most of Creeley's work.

Finally, at the time "Fading Light" was published, other poets initiated still other movements in American poetry. The first slam poets came on the scene. Slam poetry is a competitive poetry event in which audience members judge poetic performances by assigning scores to them, and these scores are added and tabulated much like the scores in figure skating or Olympic diving. In a typical slam poetry night, several poets pay entry fees and some advance to second or third rounds, and at the end of an evening a winner is announced. Many of the successful performances turned out to be comic or dramatic, with expressions of outrage at sexual, racial, or social oppression a staple of the slam scene. Around the same time, poetry festivals sprang up. In 1986 the Geraldine R. Dodge Festival began. It is a juried festival, in which organizers invite distinguished poets to give readings and workshops in a festive environment of public performance. Other festivals, such as the Austin International Poetry Festival in Texas, are non-juried, and provide multiple stages and microphones to all participants. Both types of festivals try to return poetry to its origins in the spoken word and in performance. What all these movements try to do is to take poetry off the printed page and to showcase it for listeners.

Critical Overview

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Creeley found himself securely placed among the grand elder statesmen of American poetry. His Bollingen and Lannan awards cemented his critical reception. Yet not all critics are impressed by the kind of poetry his career presents. Writing in an article on Creeley's mentor William Carlos Williams, Christopher MacGowan writes in *The Columbia History of American Poetry* that "The whole line of American poetry to which Williams is such an important figure, the line that includes such figures as Olson and Creeley, comes under similar attack from time to time." A great deal has been written about him in the last fifty years, both positive and negative. Carol Muske Dukes has said that "some critics find that he is occasionally hyper-oblique, self-consciously cute, and for all his brevity, overwrought." She quotes critic John Simon who said, "There are two things to be said about Creeley's poems: They are short; they are not short enough."

Other critics are more charitable. Don Byrd wrote that "When Creeley's poetry is dull, as it sometimes is, it is the dullness of the real, and when it is exciting, as it often is, it is the excitement of the real." Noting that Creeley began his career in rebellion against academic poets only to end up as an academic himself, Byrd distinguishes between academic and underground poets by their different approaches to poetry. "The academic poets, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, write writing as it is prepared: Creeley writes writing as it is written." Writing in 1996, Bill Piper remarks on Creeley's ability to avoid self-repetition when he states that, "Unlike many artists who reach a stride and remain with it, often becoming stale, he seems to diversify, and his work gains in interest with his deepening experience."

In her review of *Windows*, the collection in which "Fading Light" was originally published, Penny Kaganoff relates the book's title to its contents: "these carefully honed poems themselves function as 'frames' through which Creeley measures with mature insight and inventiveness the limits of reality and existence." Numerous critics have remarked on the immediacy and directness of Creeley's poetry, as does Terry R. Bacon, who declares, "Creeley's perceptions are epiphanies: glimpses of moments in the life situation that are brought into sharp focus through the high energy transference that is presumed to occur." In a 2002 review of *Just in Time*, Stephen Whited says, "The author's comforting, bebop inner voice chatters away insistently, harmonizing and connecting moment with moment, like a Charlie Parker solo." Remarking on the development of themes in Creeley's work, Whited goes on to note, "Aging has changed the focus of the familiar subjects to whom the seventy-five-year-old Creeley continuously returns; the pleasant influence of narrative and memory has been more evident in his work since the mid-'80s." Regardless of their enjoyment of his austere and oblique poetry, critics agree that Creeley has been a major influence on many younger poets and a significant presence in late twentieth-century American poetry.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Pool is a published poet and reviewer and a teacher of high school English. In this essay, Pool discusses elements of formal structure in Creeley's poem.

A young or inexperienced reader of poetry might well be perplexed upon first encountering Robert Creeley's poem "Fading Light." The poem lacks many of the features that are prominent in other poems. There is no rhyme and no meter, as in traditional verse, and yet the poem also lacks the colloquial familiarity of much contemporary free verse. Instead, the poem is difficult to grasp upon first reading, and even in subsequent perusals does not easily yield up its meaning and structures. Still, Creeley is regarded as a major poet, and as with many works by major writers, this poem reveals a structure that, while not obvious or simple, nevertheless connects the apparently chaotic lines and imagery into a coherent whole.

Some critics believe that a poem can best be interpreted in isolation, that close reading of the words on the page will generate a sound understanding, that biography and literary history are extraneous to the comprehension of a poem. On the other hand, it seems undeniable that knowing about the history and circumstances of a poem's composition adds to our appreciation. Creeley began his writing shortly after World War II. He became associated in the early 1950s with a group of writers and artists at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, an avant-garde experimental school where Creeley worked with the man who most influenced his early work, Charles Olson. There he also met Jackson Pollock and other pioneers of abstract expressionism in art. Like the abstract expressionists, Creeley faced the problem of form. He rejected the traditional verse forms that were the fashion of his time, striking out for a different modernist style. Serious art makes substantial demands on its creators; slackness and laziness are constant temptations when one has thrown over the old rules and old canons of style. Arthur Ford has stated that Creeley often quoted Pollock's proclamation: "When I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I am doing." As Ford also explains, "The form that a poem takes never precedes the poem itself but rather comes from the demands of the poem as it is in the process of being uttered." Given this aesthetic, what are the formal demands of "Fading Light," and how does Creeley meet them?

In striving for an alternative way of making poems, Creeley was influenced by Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, but most especially by Charles Olson. Olson devised a theory of "projective verse" in which the determining factor of line length is the poet's breath. Creeley was influenced by the way that Williams would sprinkle words vertically down the page in very short lines. He instinctively believed that the poet should pause momentarily at the end of each line, emphasizing and highlighting it. Ironically, in hearing recordings of Williams, Creeley was struck by the way the older poet did not read his work that way. Nevertheless, Creeley had picked up an important formal technique by his creative misreading. He always pauses a bit at the end of each line. As he said in an interview with Charles Bernstein, "I read the breaks. To me, like percussive or contrapuntal agencies, they give me a chance to get a syncopation into the classic emptiness. . . ." By "contrapuntal," he refers to the technique in music of having two

independent but harmonically related melodies playing together. He further says, "I mean, it gives me, not drumming precisely, but it's a rhythm of that character." It is the counterpoint of end-stopped lines played off against the syntactic enjambment of the meaning that provides the most important structure of this challenging poem.

All the lines end without completing a thought; a reader cannot pause and make sense. The meaning of the lines compels the reader to keep on going until there is a comprehensible place to pause. Creeley makes the task more difficult by refusing to provide any punctuation except for a period at the very end, as though this poem were one coherent sentence. The pauses make the poem sound strange. Nobody talks that way; language is not being used for its accustomed purposes; what readers encounter is a poem with everyday words arranged in a puzzling rhythm and expressing thoughts that do not make immediate sense. Thom Gunn, the critic and poet, assures readers that Creeley always reads the line breaks as little silences. Creeley knows full well that he emphasizes words such as "it" and "as" and "on" and "for." None of these words allow the reader to pause, but since readers are expected to pause, readers experience the rhythm of voice and silence in counterpoint to the flow of phrases and images in the poem.

Besides setting up a contrapuntal struggle between sound and sense, Creeley's lines also echo and rhyme words in the lines. In the Bernstein interview, talking about poems from the same collection that includes "Fading Light," the poet says about his line breaks, "It's also an agency for a lot of half-rhyming or accidental echoing that I really enjoy. It's sort of like water sloshing into a pan . . . Lapping at the edges." As the poem concludes it accelerates almost like a sled reaching the bottom of a hill.

chute the sled plunges down ends

down the hill beyond sight down

into field's darkness as time for

supper here left years behind waits

patient in mind remembers the time.

The repetition of "down" within, at the beginning, and at the end of only two lines emphasizes the motion of the poem and sets up a melody of repeated sounds. Likewise, "time," "behind," "mind," and "time" set up a repeated rhyming structure in an otherwise unrhymed poem. If these are what Creeley calls "accidental echoing," they are certainly improvised melodies that he sets up in counterpoint to his strange and halting rhythm. Ford has said about Creeley's poems that

the poem must be free from a preconceived rhythmical structure, while at the same time adhering to certain rhythmical patterns within itself, which may involve in fact, similar and dissimilar sounds within and between lines, textures of words and sounds, indeed textures of ideas themselves.

While there is indeed a contrapuntal texture of rhyme and near rhyme in this poem, the most important structure is that provided by syntax. Due to the enjambed lines and the lack of punctuation, it is not immediately apparent where phrases and clauses begin and end, except that they evidently never end at the conclusion of a line. The reader has to determine where to pause within the lines to make the poem meaningful. If the poem were to prove meaningless after all the effort it demands, critical readers would react negatively. Fortunately, the poem can be read in ways in which there are meaningful images and ideas. The poem begins with a reference to a light that seems to shift as it fades. This image is followed by musing about the world, and an elliptical question, "is it as / ever . . ." Then halfway through the poem Creeley introduces imagery of sitting "patient" (not patiently) followed by the accelerating phrases and images of a sled plunging down "beyond sight." As Gunn remarks, "The result is a kind of eloquent stammering; there is a sense of small persistent difficulties all right, but of each being overcome in turn, while it occurs□the voice hesitates and then plunges forward." Far from being left beyond the poem's field of vision, however, readers are brought back to "supper here left years behind" and a repeated motif of "waits / patient in mind" and, in a parallel rhythmic vein, "remembers the time."

The key to the poem is its last word. Creeley has said about his work that, "Nothing is permitted to quite end, or stop, until the final word of the poem." The poem is a meditation on time, on time's passage, on the endurance of the world, and resolves with a memory of time gone by. In baroque contrapuntal music, the disparate yet harmonious melodies must resolve themselves in the concluding bars. In Creeley's poem, the syntactical problems and the eloquently stammering line breaks resolve themselves in the announcement of the poem's true theme: time. It is somewhat ironic that this poem should reflect a classical or baroque structure, given its deliberate understated diction and its refusal to fly away into theory or metaphor. The words are the most plainspoken imaginable, and the poet is one who early in his career turned away from verbal pyrotechnics, elevated diction, and erudite allusions. Indeed, as Tom Clark, writing in *Robert Creeley and the Genius of the American Common Place*, asserts "In the dialectical unfolding of literary history the moment of the common comes typically as an antidote to periods of over-refinement and baroque difficulty."

Creeley began his career writing poems that were significantly different from those of W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, and Robert Frost, only to find himself, late in life, perhaps without thinking about it, incorporating formal techniques akin to musical composition. Perhaps this reversion to formalism is less surprising than it might first appear. Ford notes that Creeley is more of a formalist than most readers realize.

Creeley's poetry exhibits a much greater regularity and formalization than is usually assumed; and, what is even more significant, much of his poetry and prose, especially from the later years, can be understood best as products of the push toward form, of the classical need for preexistent form despite the modernist dismissal of it.

Ultimately there is something quite satisfying in finding form in a Creeley poem. A poet who wanted to make poetry new, a high modernist of the last half of the twentieth century, in his later years writes poetry that is formally challenging and complex. The

true artist must constantly deal with the opposing demands of freedom and formalism, and Creeley has demonstrated that the creative response to sterile formulaic formalism lies, not in ecstatic verbal excess, but in the creation of disciplined, controlled, and innovative structures of form and meaning.

Source: Frank Pool, Critical Essay on "Fading Light," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

Poetry in Motion, directed by Ron Mann in 1982, was released on DVD by Public Media in 2002. It features performances by a number of the Beat poets, including Robert Creeley, in front of live audiences.

A CD of Creeley reading poetry titled *Robert Creeley* (2001) was released on the Jagjaguwar label.

Creeley reads his poetry with a jazz trio on a CD titled *The Way out Is Via the Door* (2002).

The Electronic Poetry Center maintains a website on Robert Creeley at www.wings.buffalo.edu, which includes links and selected poems.

The Academy of American Poets maintains a website on Creeley at www.poets.org, which includes numerous links.

Topics for Further Study

In the 1950s a group of young poets became known as the Beat poets, the harbingers of the Beat Generation. Do research on this group, identify four key participants, and locate at least one characteristic poem from each writer. What do all these poets have in common, and how are their poetic voices distinctive?

Two influential creative movements of the period from 1950 to 1965 were abstract expressionism and jazz. Locate an art print of an abstract expressionist such as Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko and find a recording of jazz that you think complements the work of art. Then choose a poem by Creeley or Kerouac or Snyder, or another poet who was writing in that time, and perform the poem in front of the art, with jazz playing in the background.

Poetry festivals are a relatively recent phenomenon. Using the Internet, try to locate as many poetry festivals as you can. Do not limit yourself to the United States; other festivals occur in Britain and Australia, for instance. Do these festivals identify featured poets? Who are the poets who are identified as special guests? Try to locate poems by these poets.

Music and poetry have an ancient connection. The word "lyric," for example, is derived from the early musical instrument called the lyre. Make a personal compilation of songs whose words can stand alone as poetry. Write up the words and try to analyze them as poetry. What literary techniques can you find?

Poetry readings occur frequently in many locations, including book stores, coffee houses, and other smoke- and alcohol- free environments. Try to attend at least four different readings at different venues if possible. Keep a record of the kinds of poems you hear. What are the subjects and techniques? Do any of them seem especially effective to you? Summarize your results in a brief written evaluation.

One way to encounter poets for the first time is to read anthologies. Go to a library or a book store and spend some time looking through a collection of work by different poets. What poets appeal to you? Using reference works or the Internet, research their lives and careers.

What Do I Read Next?

Robert Creeley's book *Just in Time* (2001) consists of three shorter poetry collections written by Creeley between 1984 and 1994. It contains the poem "Fading Light," among others, as well as informative interviews with Charles Bernstein.

Arthur Ford's *Robert Creeley*, though published in 1978 and therefore not including the poet's later work, is nevertheless a quite readable introduction to Creeley's life and the first half of his career.

Robert Creeley's Life and Work (1987) contains a large number of short reviews and essays on Creeley's work. It also includes some of his early letters to other poets who were influential in his developing style.

A. Poulin's *Contemporary American Poetry* (1980, 3d ed.) has a good selection of Creeley's poems along with many others by his contemporaries.

Further Study

Campbell, James, *This Is the Beat Generation: New York San Francisco Paris*, University of California Press, 2001.

This book introduces readers to the major poets and writers of the Beat Generation, among whom are Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, and Robert Creeley. It provides cultural and historical background for this literary movement.

Clark, Tom, *Robert Creeley and the Genius of the American Common Place*, New Directions, 1993.

Clark's slim book contains a great deal of biographical material and the poet's "Autobiography." It also has many photographs and some poems, and includes transcripts of Creeley's interviews.

Creeley, Robert, *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley*, University of California Press, 1989.

This is a collection of essays, reviews, and miscellaneous literary correspondence edited by the poet. Although these writings seem disconnected at first glance, they provide an insight into Creeley's aesthetic sensibility.

Edelberg, Cynthia Dubin, *Robert Creeley's Poetry: A Critical Introduction*, University of New Mexico Press, 1978.

This book covers Creeley's early poetry, and it contains a large number of commentaries on individual poems.

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Clark, Tom, *Robert Creeley and the Genius of the American Common Place*, New Directions, 1993, p. 82.

Creeley, Robert, *Just in Time: Poems, 1984—1994*, New Directions, 2001, pp. 7, 8, 30, 201.

Dukes, Carol Muske, "Straight from the Hearth," in *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, June 23, 1991, p. 8.

Ford, Arthur L., *Robert Creeley*, Twayne Publishers, 1978, pp. 24, 36, 117.

Gunn, Thom, "Small Persistent Difficulties," in *Robert Creeley's Life and Work*, edited by John Wilson, University of Michigan Press, 1987, p. 406.

Kaganoff, Penny, Review of *Windows*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 237, No. 15, April 13, 1990, p. 59.

MacGowan, Christopher, "William Carlos Williams," in *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, edited by Jay Parini, MJF Books, 1993, p. 416.

Piper, Bill, "Robert Creeley," in *American Writers*, Suppl. 4, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1996, pp. 139—61.

Whited, Stephen, Review of *Just in Time: Poems, 1984—1994*, in *Book*, March—April 2002, p. 78.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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