# Fiddler Crab Study Guide

## Fiddler Crab by Josephine Jacobsen

BOOKRAGS

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# Introduction

□Fiddler Crab□ was, according to the chronological sections in Josephine Jacobsen's collection of poetry *In the Crevice of Time: New and Collected Poems* (1995), written between 1950 and 1965. Unfortunately, no exact date is available for the poem's original publication. In fact, since this collection is subtitled *New and Collected Poems*, the poem may have been written between 1950 and 1965 but not published before its inclusion in this collection.

□Fiddler Crab□ is a good example of a primary theme that runs through Jacobsen's entire body of work. In this poem, Jacobsen explores the connectivity between all living things and God through her observation of a fiddler crab on the beach. This poem conveys religious principles through a narrative storyline. Her decision to deliver her beliefs in this fashion is intentional and, in fact, makes the poem timeless.

Regardless of when it was written or published, □Fiddler Crab□ resonates with Jacobsen's religious exploration and understanding. Where other poems may reflect on society, Jacobsen's poetry reflects upon God and the exploration of the human soul. With this at the helm of Jacobsen's thought, her poetry is written without a social reference. Her work is far too personal to be tied to anything but her own search for truth and understanding. Jacobsen was a self-proclaimed devout Catholic, and although her work is rich spiritually, it is rarely preachy. Her message is warm, clever, and devout. With her massive, far-reaching collection of work, Jacobsen is heralded as one of the finest, most respectable poets of the twentieth century.

# Author Biography

**Nationality 1:** Canadian

**Birthdate:** 1908

**Deathdate:** 2003

Josephine Jacobsen was born August 19, 1908, in Cobourg, Ontario, Canada. Soon after her birth, Jacobsen's family moved from Canada to New York. The Jacobsens then moved to Baltimore, Maryland, when Josephine was fourteen years old. She was educated by private tutors at Roland Park Country School and graduated in 1926.

Jacobsen was renowned as a poet, short-story writer, and critic. She served as the Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 1971 to 1973 (a position that has since been renamed Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry) and as honorary consultant in American letters from 1973 to 1979. In addition to these duties, Jacobsen was the vice president of the Poetry Society of America in 1978 and 1979. Jacobsen was also a member of both the literature panel for the National Endowment of the Arts and the poetry committee of Folger Library from 1979 to 1983.

Somehow, amidst all these remarkable responsibilities, Jacobsen was able to write numerous collections, including, but not limited to, *The Instant of Knowing: Lectures on Criticism, and Occasional Prose* (1997); *What Goes without Saying: Collected Short Stories* (1996); *In the Crevice of Time: New and Collected Poems* (1995), a collection spanning nearly sixty years of writing; *The Chinese Insomniacs* (1981); and *The Shade-Seller: New and Selected Poems* (1974). Her extraordinary writing career spanned an astounding eight decades, with her first poem published in a children's magazine at the age of ten.

*In the Crevice of Time: New and Collected Poems* is Jacobsen's most expansive collection of poetry. The book is broken into five sections, each section covering a portion of Jacobsen's life as a poet. The second section of the collection spans the years 1950-1965 and includes the poem □Fiddler Crab.□ This poem is a timeless work that is an excellent example of Jacobsen's thinking and writing. In this poem, Jacobsen explores religion and God, concluding that the universe and all creatures are tied together by the struggle for survival. This theme features in the bulk of Jacobsen's writing and interviews, acting as a personal mantra about her understanding of her own life, all life, and God.

Jacobsen's clear, resounding voice and her exploration of the spiritual world garnered her great praise. In 1988, she won the L. Marshal Award for the best book of poetry. She was awarded the Shelley Memorial Award for lifetime service to literature in 1993 and was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1994. Additionally, the Poetry Society of America gave her its highest honor□the Robert Frost Medal for Lifetime Achievement in Poetry□in 1997. Jacobsen's awards and honors also include a

Doctor of Humane Letters from Goucher College, the College of Notre Dame in Maryland, Towson State University, and Johns Hopkins University. Jacobsen died July 9, 2003, in Cockeysville, Maryland, at the age of ninety-four.

# Plot Summary

## Stanza 1

In the opening stanza of □Fiddler Crab,□ Jacobsen describes the fiddler crab as it moves through its routine on the beach. The prehistoric beast □veers,□ □glides,□ and □dithers.□ It repeats its motions endlessly, over and over, as if it is completing its necessary tasks. With this descriptive stanza, Jacobsen intends to draw similarities between the fiddler crab and other organisms. She compares the crab to a horse, stating the crab's □front legs paw the air like a stallion.□ However, the crab relates to more than just a stallion. The crustacean's activities are similar to those of human beings. Both organisms go through their regular routines. Whether it is a human being moving and shifting through society or a crab veering and dithering about on the beach, both organisms are living their lives just as they believe they should.

Jacobsen also alludes to the crab's power to observe, stating, □the stilt-eyes / pop,□ as if to imply that the crab is observing his surroundings and assessing his next move. This gives the crab human traits, grouping the organisms together into an expansive, undefined category.

## Stanza 2

In the second stanza, Jacobsen portrays the crab's world: the rocky beach and the shifting tide. The water on the beach moves over the rocks, and □foam yelps leaping.□ The big rocks are □glutted with breathers under their clamped clasp.□ Jacobsen is describing the rocks covered with barnacles and other shellfish, holding desperately to the rocks as the waves wash over them, creating frothy, turbulent waters. She alludes to the waves as a □lacy wink□ that □lapses and dulls.□

The waves on the beach move unhindered over the rocks and the sand. The rocks and the sand compose the society in which the crab exists. The waves represent time as it □lapses and dulls□ society, crashing over and over again against the rocky beach. Like the waves, time can move fast or slowly, be disruptive or benign. Yet no matter how time *washes* over one and changes one's life for better or worse, time itself is completely amoral. The impact of time is easy to see□people age, the sun rises and sets, the seasons pass□what goes unanswered is why time does what it does. Jacobsen's answer is linked to the concept of amorality. Time is amoral because it works beyond any moral code. Time passed before there were human beings, and time will continue to pass after the end of human beings; thus it is set apart from that which would be considered right or wrong, moral or immoral. It is without an ethical code, because it exists outside the realm of moral judgment. Hence, the crab is affected by time similarly to a human being precisely because time makes no distinction between the crab and a human being.

Generally, a person is not disturbed when someone kills a crab. Most people, however, are disturbed when a human being kills a fellow human being. Time makes no such distinction. The morality of these two actions is outside the scope of time, as are all forms of morality. With these lines, the fiddler crab becomes just as dramatically affected by time as humankind, binding the organisms together at a level beyond, yet still anchored in, the physical world.

## Stanza 3

In the third stanza, Jacobsen enters the poem as a first-person voice. She witnesses and observes the crab's plight and struggle against the tide. She writes, □I saw the fiddler crab veer, glide, prance, / dither and paw, in elliptical rushes / skirt the white curve and flatten on the black / shine.□ The crab is battling against the elements, trying its best to survive and live well as the tide rushes forward. Jacobsen is empathizing with the crab from the common ground that all organisms must battle the elements of the world and struggle against them for survival. The crab rushes into a □trembling hole□ to avoid the crushing surf. Jacobsen would argue that all creatures must, at some point, seek a safe haven from the uncontrollable tempests or face the only other alternative: death. With this, Jacobsen indirectly frames *life* as the struggle for survival that occurs between a creature's birth and its death.

## Stanza 4

In the fourth stanza, Jacobsen reveals that she is standing on the beach with the crab. This draws her directly into the crab's world, intricately tying Jacobsen to this particular fiddler crab. The two suddenly are not of separate worlds; they are simply affected by different elements, in different ways, within the same world. She writes, □I imitated him with my five fingers, but not well.□ The crab is much better at being a crab than Jacobsen is. However, when the crab comes out of his hole, he runs in a □tippity panicky glide to the wave's wink,□ showing that Jacobsen is much better at being a human than the crab is, because Jacobsen does not have to run or hide from the wave's power. Last, Jacobsen writes, □Each entirely alone on his beach; but who / is the god of the crabs?□ Although Jacobsen has identified that she and the crab coexist in the same world and that both creatures' lives are defined by their individual struggles for survival in the world, Jacobsen questions what god has created the crab's world.

## Stanza 5

In this fifth stanza, Jacobsen returns to strict observation and gives a short narrative about the crab's final moments. She writes,

The Spanish-Chinese boy brought him to show.

His stilted eyes popped over three broken legs

but he ran with the rest of them over the edge

and died on the point of the drop down

twenty feet.

Jacobsen tells the story of the boy and of the crab plunging to its death. The crab struggled to free himself from the boy. After freeing himself, the crab tried to run for safety, plunging to his death twenty feet below. This moment in conjunction with the crab's birth frames the crab's life and ends its struggle against the elements of the world.

## Stanza 6

In the final stanza, Jacobsen sees the simplicity of existence in the crab's death. She writes, □So it is simple: he can be hurt / and then he can die.□ After all her observations and conclusions about the differences and similarities between herself and the crab, Jacobsen ends with a base understanding of life as pain and the struggle against death. Although it may take on different forms□for example, for the crab it was the surf and the Spanish-Chinese boy, whereas it may be an earthquake or cancer for a human being□all creatures face the same essential challenge for survival. If this is accepted as true, then, as Jacobsen professes at the end of □Fiddler Crab,□ the □subject matter we [all] have in common . . . is our god.□

# Themes

## The Levels of Time

In Jacobsen's poem □Fiddler Crab,□ time is a principal theme. Time plays a tricky role in the lives of most humans. Frequently, time seems to pass at differing rates. Sometimes it flies by, and at other moments it creeps. When a person looks back on events from the past, some of them seem as if they happened only yesterday, while others seem as if they happened to a different person, in a different life. Oddly, these feelings may not be hinged to events chronologically. In fact, more often than not, the variable feeling of the passage of time is intricately tied to the suffering of the individual. For example, in Jacobsen's own life, she recalled a wonderful day spent with her husband some twenty years in the past, which seemed to have just taken place. But when she recollected her grandson's death□a painful event that occurred long after the wonderful day spent with her husband□she told Evelyn Prettyman in an interview for *New Letters*, □I remember when I went back to our summer house the summer after our grandson's death . . . it seemed to me that there were hundreds of years between that summer and the summer before.□ This level of time is a pervasive theme in □Fiddler Crab□ and in all of Jacobsen's work.

In the poem, it is fair to assume that time is similar to the tide and the waves. This is metaphoric on several levels. First, time seems to happen in irregular intervals. The waves represent the strange, unpredictable moments in time. The tide, like minutes, hours, days, and weeks, can be predicted and plotted. However, the moments□the waves□still remain an unpredictable mystery. Just as time clearly passes from today to tomorrow, so do the tides shift from high to low, but from moment to moment the waves that hit the shore are like the mysterious instances that cause humans to feel a strange relationship to time and its passing. These mysterious instances happen in the present. The effects that follow are unpredictable. When an event happens, a moment passes, a person does not know its effect until it is over and the person has reflected upon it. In the poem, most of the waves that the crab struggles against are nothing remarkable and so have little impact on his life. But the one wave that washes him into the boy's hands, or off to sea, or into a fertile feeding ground will have a profound effect on his life, though he is unaware of this impact until that particular, mysterious instance has passed.

From a different perspective, time frames existence. For Jacobsen, life is a struggle for survival, with a beginning and an end. At birth a creature comes into being and effectively starts surviving, starts living; at death the creature stops surviving, stops living. This simplistic understanding of time is applicable across the board to the lives of all creatures. That there is a beginning and an ending to life is true for all creatures, human or not. Since Jacobsen believes that the gift of life is given by God, all life, human or not, comes from God. Without time framing life, it would be difficult for Jacobsen to reach the conclusion that life is the same for all creatures and that God is the same for all creatures.

These analyses of time, no matter how interesting, come from a human dissection of something eternal. They cannot be wholly explained with common intellectual analysis. Jacobsen often delves into these profound questions in her poetry. In this case, she accepts that she will never be able to fully understand the impact of time because, effectively, they lead to questions about God. For Jacobsen, the unanswered questions about God are satisfied by her faith in the Catholic Church. Faith and religion fill the holes left by her human dissection of time and the unanswerable questions about God. Without her leap of faith, these questions would remain unsatisfied.

## Life as Survival

In □Fiddler Crab,□ Jacobsen observes a crab's existence and, in doing so, defines life as the struggle for survival against the elements of the world. The crab must battle the never-ending pounding of the surf. The crab □fiddles, glides and dithers / dithers and glides, veers□ in a ceaseless dance to continue living. Later, Jacobsen notes that the fiddler crab, □veered in a gliding rush / and up to piled sand and into a trembling hole / where grains fell past him.□ The crab not only dances about, dodging the surf, but also must take shelter in holes and □skirt the white curve [of the wave] and flatten on the black shine.□ The crab's existence on the rocky beach is nothing but a moment-to-moment struggle for survival against the constant, aggressive assault from an amoral force: the surf. As if this daily routine were not enough, the crab must also survive other elements: other creatures.

In the poem, □two hours later,□ after Jacobsen has stopped observing the fiddler crab, a Spanish-Chinese boy has captured the fiddler crab. The crab, battling for survival against the waves, may never have seen the approaching boy. When Jacobsen returns to the scene, the boy has the crab on a balcony; the crustacean now has □three broken legs / but he ran with the rest of them over the edge / and died on the point of the drop down / twenty feet.□ The crab's life and struggle for survival were framed by his birth and his death, a twenty-foot fall. Here again the observation of the crab's complex struggle□the constant fiddling, gliding, and dithering□is reduced to a simple, frank existence: birth and death. Everything that passed between was just surviving, just life.

## The Commonality of God

The two themes of time and life as survival come to an apex with a simple understanding of life as that which occurs between birth and death. The time between these two events is a painful struggle to stay alive. In □Fiddler Crab,□ Jacobsen observes that she and the crab share this plight. She writes, □So it is simple: he can be hurt / and then he can die.□ Just like the crab, Jacobsen could be hurt and, just like the crab, someday she will lose her struggle for survival and die. This is a difficult conclusion to reach, because Jacobsen and the fiddler crab look so dissimilar and live so differently. A human and a fiddler crab: What could they possibly have in common? Strangely enough, the answer, for Jacobsen, is of immense proportions. She concludes in her poem □Fiddler Crab□ that □it was easy to miss / on the sand how I should know

him and he me / and what subject matter we have in common. / It is our god.□ Laying all characteristics aside that separate and distinguish Jacobsen from the fiddler crab□and all humans from all fiddler crabs or any one creature from another□there is beneath these differences a struggle for survival. This struggle is life, and this life is given by a creator to the creatures. For Jacobsen, that creator is God. Hence, if creatures struggle for a common survival that defines their lives, then that life must also come from a common god. Therefore, Jacobsen would argue, all creatures have in common the god that gives them life.

# Style

## Narrative Poetry

Narrative poetry is generally a nondramatic style of poetry in which the author tells a story. In □Fiddler Crab,□ Jacobsen tells a story about the life of a fiddler crab on a beach. The construction of the narrative is simple. Jacobsen witnesses the crab's activities and motion on the beach, battling the surf. She describes the beauty of the water, the rocks, and the frothing waves. Jacobsen brings herself into the narrative, imitating the crab with her hand and casting a shadow across the beach. In addition, Jacobsen introduces another character□the Spanish-Chinese boy□who is ultimately responsible for the crab's demise. Although Jacobsen uses the poem to deliver a message about life and God, □Fiddler Crab□ is still an example of narrative poetry.

## Personification

In □Fiddler Crab,□ the crab takes on human qualities, showing the similarities between Jacobsen and the crab. The crab's □body glides□ and □dithers□ like that of a dancer or a boxer. The creature observes and reacts to life, and Jacobsen refers to the crab in a friendly way, calling the creature □he□ and □him.□ The crab's human qualities lead Jacobsen to believe that they share a common struggle, which in turn suggests to Jacobsen that they share a common god. Without some catalyst to draw a connection between the crab and Jacobsen, there would be no way the poet could effectively deliver the message of a common, life-giving god.

## The Effects of Irregular Rhythm

Although the poem is narrative in style and tells the story of the fiddler crab, it also irregularly changes rhythm, instilling different emotions in the reader. The first three stanzas are frantic and frenetic as the crab eludes the waves, whereas the last three are slow and introspective. Even though the crab's struggle for survival wanes and eventually ends in the last three stanzas, the rhythm of the poem does not reflect sadness. Instead it presents the crab's death rather in a matter-of-fact way, bolstering Jacobsen's analysis of life rather than focusing on the dramatic, painful demise of the crab.

# Historical Context

Jacobsen's □Fiddler Crab□ is set in an indeterminate time and a nonspecific place. The poem has no direct relationship to any moment in history for two reasons. First, a primary theme of the poem is time and its levels. To adequately address the questions of the levels of time (for example, eternity), framing life between birth and death, a sense of proportion, and so forth, the poem cannot be fixed to or affected by any one relative moment. In order for Jacobsen's observations and commentary on time to maintain a sense of timelessness, she must question the nature of time outside any reference to history and chronology. Although □Fiddler Crab□ was written sometime between 1950 and 1965, no particular date is given or referenced in the poem.

Second, Jacobsen avoids any reference to a particular time or place because the poem is also a personal exploration of faith. Jacobsen is a self-proclaimed devout Catholic, and her personal spiritual journey is long and introspective. Her body of work clearly outlines how she feels about human life as a struggle for survival. Religion, or faith, is present in much of her writings, and she works from simple facts. These simple facts are free of the convulsions of history, free of varied perspectives of particular moments. For example, in □Fiddler Crab□ she concludes, even through rigorous analysis of time and life, that for all living creatures life is a struggle for survival. From this very simple fact, Jacobsen assumes, in the context of her faith, that life is given by God□not just human life, but all life. This solves the problem of multiple gods, because there is no need for a Crab God and a Human God if life is defined the same for all creatures. There is a difficulty with this model, in that it does not introduce an ethic. Yet an ethic is unnecessary at this basic level. Ethics are formed by human and social interests. Hence, this type of spirituality cannot be seen through a political, social, or historical lens. Not only is it a religious analysis of life, it is also an individualistic analysis of life.

Jacobsen is inexplicably tied to the physical world because she believes that the spirit is encased in physical bodies, whether it is a human or a fiddler crab. However, her exploration of the world and her pursuit of God and personal spirituality must exist wholly outside the time-bound constraints of historical, political, and social ideologies. Otherwise, the mysteries of faith and religion become a point of reference for viewing these ideologies rather than the goal of the exploration.

# Critical Overview

Given that Jacobsen is considered a contemporary poet, there has been a surprisingly substantial amount of criticism written about her work. On the other hand, it might be fair to say that very little has been written about her body of work that spans eight decades. Regardless, Nancy Sullivan's praise in the *Hollins Critic* summarizes Jacobsen's greatness, stating, "The energy and quality of Josephine Jacobsen's work in poetry, fiction, and criticism, as well as her public service on behalf of poetry, are remarkable." Jacobsen is easily one of the twentieth-century's greatest poets, writers, lecturers, and critics. Her work is highly spiritual, yet not preachy or overtly in support of a religious doctrine. Although she was a devout Catholic, her poems explore her individual pursuit of spirituality, her personal interpretations of the word of God, and her never-ending search for answers to the mysteries of life and faith.

The collection that contains "Fiddler Crab" may be Jacobsen's greatest achievement. This work, *In the Crevice of Time: New and Collected Poems*, spans sixty years of Jacobsen's poetic productivity. The chronological organization of her work unfolds Jacobsen's deeply personal journey of spiritual exploration, personal growth, physical aging, and deepening understanding. Elizabeth Spires writes in the *New Criterion*:

To read *In the Crevice of Time: New and Collected Poems* is akin to watching some frightening or wondrous natural process, say a tree or flower blooming, captured in time-lapse photography"from the first stirrings of a germinal impulse to the rapid movement into individuality, maturity, and inevitable denouement. It's a disturbingly compressed tale of birth, change, growth, and oblivion.

Spires's summarization of *In the Crevice of Time: New and Collected Poems* is also a clear summarization of Jacobsen's life, her work, and her pursuit of life's mysteries. Though she gained great acclaim and recognition, Jacobsen's greatest contribution may be her effect on individual lives. Her writing was so deeply personal that it seemed to open the door for other critics, poets, writers, and lecturers to embark on their own explorations. Although Jacobsen should rightly be remembered for her awards, honors, achievements, and work, the world should not forget her paramount desire to solve life's greatest mysteries.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

# Critical Essay #1

*Martinelli is a Seattle-based freelance writer and editor. In this essay, he examines how Jacobsen uses the poetic narrative to tell a story about the life of a fiddler crab and then from the story makes the claim that all life comes from one god.*

The poem □Fiddler Crab□ appears in Jacobsen's expansive collection *In the Crevice of Time: New and Collected Poems*, published in 1995. The work is a short narrative poem telling the story of a fiddler crab's life and death. It is nondramatic, but this does not detract from its complexity. □Fiddler Crab□ is an excellent example of how narrative poetry can, in fact, deliver a complex message. Beyond this, □Fiddler Crab□ can be better understood as a benchmark example of Jacobsen's entire body of work. Throughout her eight-decade-long career, Jacobsen delivered nothing short of profound, rich, spiritual work, and □Fiddler Crab□ is no exception. In this poem, Jacobsen tells the story of a fiddler crab: the crab's struggle for survival and ultimately his demise. Beneath the surface of the narrative, the poem questions and defines existence, compares the lives of all creatures, and uses the story of the fiddler crab to deduce that all life is created and given by one god.

In the opening stanza, Jacobsen begins to construct her narrative poem. The crab is observed as □he veers fast, glides, stops, / dithers, paws.□ The creature is simply moving about, almost going through a routine. There is almost no discussion of the fiddler crab's crablike features, that is, no remarks about the crab's claws, shell, chitinous burrs, and so forth. Jacobsen avoids this description with intent. She intends to draw parallels between the fiddler crab's existence and her own. The most important aspect of the first stanza is what it *does not* do; namely, it does not demand a distinct separation between fiddler crabs and humans.

In the second stanza, Jacobsen describes the crab's setting. Her rich, lyrical images paint a vivid picture of water that is □five shades of blue□ and a rocky beach covered with □scarab shapes and tiny white and black whorls.□ She also comments on the waves, remarking that the □lacy wink lapses, behind it the black lustre / lapses and dulls.□ The waves are these lacy winks, and the reference to lapsing is not arbitrary. From a narrative poetic standpoint, this stanza describes the poem's setting, but Jacobsen, with her ever-complex intentions, is making a greater comment about time. The waves are winks because they represent moments in time. Jacobsen's verb choice□□lapses□□is connected to the passage of time. Each wave that crashes to the shore is a wink, an instant in time. Collectively, these instants make up history, and this is time lapsing, or gliding along. All the waves that have crashed against the shore represent all the history of the world, while all those that have yet to break represent the unknown future. The individual wink that occurs is nothing more than the fleeting moment that marks existence□life□between what has passed and what has yet to become.

Jacobsen's comment on time is integral to the third stanza, where she brings together the crab and its interaction with the waves. In this stanza, Jacobsen herself enters the

narrative poem as a character□the observer. This, too, is not unintentional. From a narrative poetic standpoint, this stanza describes the crab dodging, attempting to □skirt the white curve□ by □flatten[ing] on the black shine.□ The fiddler crab is trying in desperation to avoid the rushing waves, and when he is caught by the frothing waters, he holds on to the shiny black rocks for dear life. At one point the crab even has to escape into a □trembling hole□ as he fights for survival against the surf. Again Jacobsen is making a greater comment about the crab's battle against time. For Jacobsen, life is defined by the struggle for survival. All the physical, living moments that occur between the crab's birth and death are nothing more than a collective struggle against time. Just as the crab strains against the constant, ever-breaking waves, so does the crab struggle against each wink of time, not knowing which one will be the last contribution to the lapse of time that constructs his individual history.

In the next stanza, Jacobsen makes her personal connection to the crab more obvious, bringing it to the forefront by mimicking his movements. She writes, □I imitated him with my five fingers, but not well.□ Here, Jacobsen points out that she and the crab are physically different creatures and that she is, in fact, poor at being a crab. She watches the crab come out of a hole in the sand, witnessing again his □tippity panicky glide to the wave's wink.□ This moment□this wink in time□is shared by the fiddler crab and Jacobsen. They have shared a moment together in their individual struggles for survival. She further binds herself to the creature in the last two lines of the stanza, writing, □Each entirely alone on this beach; but who / is the god of the crabs?□ The question at the end of the stanza is difficult to answer. Through their shared wink in time, Jacobsen realizes that both her life and the crab's are defined by a singular common element: the struggle for survival. Although the wink in time they shared□the breaking wave□did not threaten Jacobsen's existence, it was still a moment in common. The struggle for survival differs subjectively from creature to creature and, for that matter, from individual to individual. However, through this moment shared with the crab, Jacobsen suddenly understands that all creatures□not just all humans□define their existence through their struggles for survival, creating a sticky problem in terms of the existence of divine beings.

Jacobsen believes in one god as presented by the Catholic Church. She accepts, as a presupposition, that this singular god has given life to humankind. From this perspective, Jacobsen struggles to define the life that has been bestowed upon her by God. The spiritual journey to define existence is rich throughout her work, and □Fiddler Crab□ is certainly no exception; still, what results in this stanza clearly creates a predicament. God has given life to Jacobsen. Jacobsen's spiritual exploration of her life has led her to the conclusion that life is defined by the struggle for survival. Surviving the winks, the moments, through the passage of time defines Jacobsen's existence. In □Fiddler Crab,□ Jacobsen supports this claim in a poetic narrative about the fiddler crab. However, the poem's narrative defines the fiddler crab's life in a fashion identical to her own life, as a fight for survival: given Jacobsen's belief that God gave her life, she asks, with respect to this companion creature, □who / is the god of the crabs?□ Jacobsen knows that something must have given the crab life and that that something must be a god. Thus, the answer to this sticky question alludes to the existence of more than one god, that is, Jacobsen's Catholic God and the □god of the crabs.□

In the fifth stanza, Jacobsen returns to her narrative, almost leaving the predicament of the fourth stanza and the question of multiple gods. In these lines, Jacobsen tidies up the fiddler crab's existence with his death. She writes

The Spanish-Chinese boy brought him to show.

His stilted eyes popped over three broken legs

but he ran with the rest of them over the edge

and died on the point of the drop down

twenty feet.

In a straightforward manner, Jacobsen describes the end of the crab's struggle for survival and, with it, the end of his life. This stanza is intentionally linked to the physicality of the crab, which is an important concept for Jacobsen. In an interview with Evelyn Prettyman in *New Letters*, Jacobsen states, □I believe in the explicable tangle of body and spirit; the spirit is encased in the physical. If you're going to know God you've got to know him in physical terms.□ Although this stanza is not overly dramatic, it does comment directly on the crab's physical body, remarking on his □broken legs□ and □stilted eyes.□ The death of the crab is the end of him in physical terms, leaving only the exploration of his spirit and, thus, his connection to God.

With the death of the crab comes Jacobsen's revelation about God. It is as if with the death of the crab's physical body the question of his spirit becomes easily understood. Jacobsen writes, □So it is simple: he can be hurt / and then he can die.□ Like a human being, the crab's life is defined by the struggle for survival, the power to withstand the pain of life until the end. More important, in this stanza Jacobsen highlights the connectivity of herself with the crab and all living things, but she overlooks something in the predicament she reached in the fourth stanza. It is true that the crab and Jacobsen both define their lives by their struggle for survival, and it is also true that they are different both as species□a crustacean and a human□and as separate individuals□Jacobsen and fiddler crab. However, Jacobsen failed in the fourth stanza in her understanding of the definition of life. Jacobsen and the crab are not tied together by their common definition of life as a struggle for survival. The struggle for survival is life, and it is what ties all of existence together. God did not give a different life to Jacobsen, to the fiddler crab, and to this or that individual; God created all of life. All that is alive is from God and of God; the individual understanding of this life, that is, the crab's individual struggle against the surf or a human's individual struggle against illness, is subjective. Jacobsen concedes this point in her interview with Prettyman, stating, □We're even united with the whole of the animal kingdom by the fact that they can suffer, and fear and be hurt.□

In the last lines of □Fiddler Crab,□ Jacobsen writes

. . . In all his motions

and marine manoeuvres it was easy to miss

on the sand how I should know him and he me

and what subject matter we have in common.

It is our god.

With this, the subjective differences and similarities that Jacobsen observes between herself and the crab in the first five stanzas are reduced to that which defines their physical existences and their individual, physical struggles for survival. Although the moments of survival collectively define their individual histories, it is what lies beneath that is the true definition of life. That life is created by and bestowed upon all living things by a single, solitary god.

**Source:** Anthony Martinelli, Critical Essay on □Fiddler Crab,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

# Topics for Further Study

In □Fiddler Crab,□ Jacobsen draws a connection between herself as a human being and the fiddler crab she observes on a beach. Her poem intricately ties humanity to all living things through shared suffering, struggle, and death. This commonality leads Jacobsen to assume that all living things share the same god. Research Native American beliefs and the ways in which their observations connect humans to animals. How do the beliefs of Native Americans mirror or oppose Jacobsen's understanding?

Select an animal that you feel mimics your life and write a poem describing the animal, its movements and activities in the world, and its relation to you. Beyond simple observation of the animal, try to draw similarities between the animal and your physical manifestation as well as any connectivity you might detect about the animal's essence and your own being. On the other hand, if you find no connectivity between your being and the animal's or if you do not believe in the concept of a soul in general or that either you or the animal has a soul, express this opinion through your poem.

Jacobsen was a devout Catholic, and although her work is not heavily religious, it does carry a clear spiritual message. What other stories or poems have you read that also carry a spiritual message? Select one other story or poem and try to draw a link between the work and a particular religion or spiritual path.

Jacobsen began writing poetry and fiction at the age of ten. Her work was always heavily influenced by her Catholic upbringing, and her devotion to Catholicism did not waver. Select another poet from the twentieth century with a large corpus of work spanning many decades and choose a variety of poems from his or her expansive collection. Do you notice a change in the feeling or motive of the work as the poet ages? Explain your selected poet's transformation, or lack thereof, in a short essay.

# Compare and Contrast

**1950s:** The U.S. presidency term is restricted to eight years.

**Today:** The U.S. presidency is still restricted to eight years, but there are discussions about removing the requirement that an individual must be born a U.S. citizen in order to run for president.

**1950s:** It is reported that lung cancer is linked directly to smoking. However, tobacco companies continue to produce and sell cigarettes without any repercussions.

**Today:** Millions of people still smoke cigarettes, even though the habit has been linked directly to many diseases. However, tobacco companies are increasingly held responsible for producing and selling dangerous products to consumers.

**1950s:** James Watson and Francis Crick decipher the structure of DNA, opening an entirely new field of biological study: genetics.

**Today:** DNA is at the forefront of scientific exploration into genetic disease, stem-cell research, and cloning. Religious and scientific communities are at odds with one another as the struggle between God and science continues.

**1950s:** Racial segregation in American schools is declared unconstitutional.

**Today:** Although racial segregation is still unconstitutional, the American education system continues to suffer under the division of wealth, with students from wealthy neighborhoods receiving a better education than students from poor neighborhoods.

# What Do I Read Next?

*What Goes without Saying: Collected Stories by Josephine Jacobsen* (2000) comprises thirty short stories, all previously published. These stories take the reader to exotic lands and are of the highest literary merit.

*The Instant of Knowing: Lectures, Criticism, and Occasional Prose* (1997) features two lectures delivered at the Library of Congress during Jacobsen's term as Consultant in Poetry.

*Adios, Mr. Moxley: Thirteen Stories* (1986) is a collection of short stories that explores the highs and lows of love and life.

*Spinach Days* (2003), by Robert Phillips, is a short collection of poetry. Phillips's work is inspired by Jacobsen, and this book presents poems in his various, innovative styles and poetic forms, including haiku, long narratives, short lyrics, and free verse.

# Further Study

Beck, Edward L., *God Underneath: Spiritual Memoirs of a Catholic Priest*, Image, 2002.

This collection of short stories takes an innovative approach to religion and spirituality. Father Beck's vignettes are touching and hilarious but deeply esoteric. The book brings together preaching and storytelling to deliver a profound, yet entertaining message.

Bokenkotter, Thomas, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, Doubleday, 2003.

This critically acclaimed history covers the most important events that have shaped Catholicism over the past two thousand years. It is a useful reference book and one of the best-selling religious histories of the past two decades.

Craig, David, and McCann, Janet, eds., *Place of Passage: Contemporary Catholic Poetry*, Story Line Press, 2000.

This is a diverse and intriguing collection of modern poems on Catholic themes arranged around the Christian calendar. Selections include writings from Thomas Merton, Robert Fitzgerald, and Annie Dillard.

Martin, James, ed., *Awake My Soul: Contemporary Catholics on Traditional Devotions*, Loyal Press, 2004.

In this book, Martin has collected essays focusing on devotion and the contemporary believer. The book includes works by some of today's most prominent Catholic writers, including Ron Hansen, Emilie Griffin, Joan Chittister, and Eric Stoltz, as they celebrate traditional Catholic devotions through vignettes and essays.

# Bibliography

Jacobsen, Josephine, “Fiddler Crab,” in *In the Crevice of Time: New and Collected Poems*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, pp. 37-38.

Prettyman, Evelyn, “The Mystery of Faith: An Interview with Josephine Jacobsen,” in *New Letters*, Vol. 53, No. 4, Summer 1987, pp. 47, 49, 50.

Spires, Elizabeth, “Joy & Terror: The Poems of Josephine Jacobsen,” in *New Criterion*, Vol. 14, No. 3, November 1995, p. 28.

Sullivan, Nancy, “Power as Virtue: The Achievement of Josephine Jacobsen,” in *Hollins Critic*, Vol. 22, No. 2, April 1985, p. 1.

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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