Having it Out with Melancholy Study Guide

Having it Out with Melancholy by Jane Kenyon

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Jane Kenyon's "Having it Out with Melancholy" was first published in her 1993 collection *Constance*. The poem also appears in the posthumous collection *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems* (1996) and, more recently, on the Academy of American Poets web site at www.poets.org. *Constance* contains several poems that address issues of physical and mental illness, but probably none so disclosing of Kenyon's own life as "Having it Out with Melancholy." While it is rarely a good idea to assume that every word of a seemingly autobiographical poem is an actual account of the poet's "real" experiences and thoughts, one may safely assume that this one is based on Kenyon's own life. Her battle with chronic depression has been well documented by herself, her husband, and critics and the speaker of this poem faces the same fight.

"Having it Out with Melancholy" is a lengthy poem, with its one hundred lines broken into nine sections, each with an appropriate title. The parts are arranged chronologically, beginning with the speaker's first encounter with melancholy as an infant, continuing through her young adulthood into her thirties, and concluding at a later age. Throughout the poem, the voice remains calm and matterof- fact, avoiding the painful emotionalism the speaker feels. The language is cool and spare, as Kenyon does an excellent job of describing a tortured life with non-torturing words.

Author Biography

Jane Kenyon was born May 23, 1947, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Kenyon eventually attended her hometown university, the University of Michigan, earning a bachelor's degree in 1970 and a master's in 1972. While at Michigan, she was a student of renowned poet, editor, and teacher Donald Hall, with whom she developed a personal relationship throughout the course of her studies. Kenyon and Hall married the same year she received her master's degree.

Her marriage and subsequent move to Eagle Pond Farm in New Hampshire□owned by the Hall family for generations□were the impetus behind Kenyon becoming a published poet. Her first book of poems, *From Room to Room*, published in 1978, chronicles the experience of living in her new home, and many of the poems reflect a speaker alone in the house, staring out a window, trying to write. Her work in this volume is primarily domestic and pastoral, although the intriguing imagery for which she would later become recognized is already evident here. Kenyon's second and third books, *The Boat of Quiet Hours* (1986) and *Let Evening Come* (1990), explore darker themes, most significantly, death, illness, and depression. During the period these poems were penned, her husband was diagnosed with cancer (which he survived) and she was in the midst of her own battle with severe depression. The fourth and final book of poems published during her lifetime, *Constance* (1993) contains even more references to disease and sadness and includes one of her most personally revealing poems, "Having it Out with Melancholy." After her death from leukemia in 1995, a fifth volume titled *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems* (1996) was published containing twenty poems written just prior to her death, along with several from her earlier works.

Kenyon's poetry was well received by critics and readers from her first publication onward. Although none of her books won specific awards, she herself was the recipient of several, including the Avery and Julie Hopwood Award for Poetry from the University of Michigan, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1981), the New Hampshire Commission on the Arts (1984), and the Guggenheim Foundation (1992-1993). Kenyon died April 23, 1995, in Wilmot, New Hampshire, one month short of her forty-eighth birthday. She is survived by her husband and two step-children.

Poem Text

1. FROM THE NURSERY

When I was born, you waited
behind a pile of linen in the nursery,
and when we were alone, you lay down
on top of me, pressing
the bile of desolation into every pore.

And from that day on
everything under the sun and moon
made me sad□even the yellow
wooden beads that slid and spun
along a spindle on my crib.

You taught me to exist without gratitude.
You ruined my manners toward God:
"We're here simply to wait for death;
the pleasures of earth are overrated."

I only appeared to belong to my mother,
to live among blocks and cotton undershirts
with snaps; among red tin lunch boxes
and report cards in ugly brown slipcases.
I was already yours□the anti-urge,
the mutilator of souls.

2. BOTTLES

Elavil, Ludiomil, Doxepin,
Norpramin, Prozac, Lithium, Xanax,
Wellbutrin, Parnate, Nardil, Zoloft.
The coated ones smell sweet or have
no smell; the powdery ones smell
like the chemistry lab at school
that made me hold my breath.

3. SUGGESTION FROM A FRIEND

You wouldn't be so depressed
if you really believed in God.

4. OFTEN

Often I go to bed as soon after dinner
as seems adult
(I mean I try to wait for dark)
in order to push away
from the massive pain in sleep's
frail wicker coracle.

5. ONCE THERE WAS LIGHT

Once, in my early thirties, I saw
that I was a speck of light in the great
river of light that undulates through time.
I was floating with the whole
human family. We were all colors—those
who are living now, those who have died,
those who are not yet born. For a few
moments I floated, completely calm,
and I no longer hated having to exist.

Like a crow who smells hot blood
you came flying to pull me out
of the glowing stream.
"I'll hold you up. I never let my dear
ones drown!" After that, I wept for days.

6. IN AND OUT

The dog searches until he finds me
upstairs, lies down with a clatter
of elbows, puts his head on my foot.

Sometimes the sound of his breathing
saves my life—in and out, in
and out; a pause, a long sigh. . . .

7. PARDON

A piece of burned meat
wears my clothes, speaks
in my voice, dispatches obligations
haltingly, or not at all.
It is tired of trying
to be stouthearted, tired
beyond measure.

We move on to the monoamine

oxidase inhibitors. Day and night
I feel as if I had drunk six cups
of coffee, but the pain stops
abruptly. With the wonder
and bitterness of someone pardoned
for a crime she did not commit
I come back to marriage and friends,
to pink fringed hollyhocks; come back
to my desk, books, and chair.

8. CREDO

Pharmaceutical wonders are at work
but I believe only in this moment
of well-being. Unholy ghost,
you are certain to come again.

Coarse, mean, you'll put your feet
on the coffee table, lean back,
and turn me into someone who can't
take the trouble to speak; someone
who can't sleep, or who does nothing
but sleep; can't read, or call
for an appointment for help.

There is nothing I can do
against your coming.
When I awake, I am still with thee.

9. WOOD THRUSH

High on Nardil and June light
I wake at four,
waiting greedily for the first
note of the wood thrush. Easeful air
presses through the screen
with the wild, complex song
of the bird, and I am overcome

by ordinary contentment.
What hurt me so terribly
all my life until this moment?
How I love the small, swiftly
beating heart of the bird
singing in the great maples;
its bright, unequivocal eye.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-5

The epigraph appearing at the start of "Having it Out with Melancholy" sounds a rather foreboding note. The quote from Russian playwright Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* not only implies pessimism and hopelessness with its certainty that an "illness has no cure," but also sets the stage for an upcoming section of the poem in which the speaker lists her own "many remedies" that have been prescribed for her sickness.

The poem moves from the epigraph to the title of the first section, "From the Nursery," which lets the reader know right away that the speaker is going back in time to her infancy, a time when the human mind cannot really remember events that occurred. But, in the poem, she speaks clearly of what she saw and felt from her crib as though the memories are real, and she personifies her illness in order to talk to it and about it as she would a human foe.

Apparently the speaker believes she was born with melancholia, for she claims that it "waited / behind a pile of linen in the nursery" when she was first brought home after birth. Melancholia does not expose itself until she is alone, at which time she describes it as an intruder come to suffocate her with "the bile of desolation" pressing "into every pore." These lines imply that, from the very beginning, she is helpless against the sadness and lifelessness that remained with her into adulthood.

Lines 6-10

These lines reinforce the notion that depression, or at least the tendency for it, is something with which one is born and against which one is therefore defenseless. She states that "from that day on / everything under the sun and moon / made me sad"□quite an assertion by itself, made even more startling by the example of what "everything" entails. Even the simple "wooden beads" often seen on baby cribs meant to stimulate or entertain the child had just the opposite effect on the speaker. They, too, made her feel depressed.

Lines 11-14

In these lines, the speaker gives a voice to the personified melancholy. First, she blames it for the fact that she is not even grateful to be alive and that she does not have a good relationship with a Supreme Being. This reference to God is reiterated later in the poem and is a matter that weighs heavily on the speaker's mind. The voice of melancholy appears in lines 13 and 14, in which it spouts a belief that runs contrary to what most "normal" human beings want to hear. Depression tells the speaker that "the pleasures of earth" are useless, and that she was placed on earth "simply to wait for death." The fact that these dismal thoughts are still within the "From the Nursery"

section of this poem emphasizes the contention that even the very young may struggle with mental illness.

Lines 15-20

The final six lines of the first part drive home the point that the speaker's illness began in early childhood. The illness has such a strong hold on her that she feels she belongs to it more so than to her mother. While she had all the material objects typical of a little girl growing up in the 1950s "blocks and cotton undershirts . . . red tin lunch boxes / and report cards in ugly brown slipcases" what she also had was a battle going on in her mind with a silent, horrifying enemy whom she calls a "mutilator of souls." She also refers to her melancholy as "the anti-urge," indicating the illness's ability to zap all human drive, passion, and determination from her very depths.

Lines 21-23

The second section is called "Bottles," an appropriate title as the first three lines consist simply of a list of medications that come in these containers. Calling out the names of the eleven types of antidepressant medications, she tries to emphasize just how acute and chronic her illness is. All these drugs are commonly prescribed for depression and similar mental ailments, but it may not be so common for one individual to have sampled them all. The point here is that the speaker's melancholia is so deep that nothing seems to relieve it.

Lines 24-27

The last four lines of the brief "Bottles" section imply the speaker's personal connection to her medication. She describes their textures and odors the way someone might talk about different foods or other necessities. The reference to the "chemistry lab at school" is a reminder that the troubled speaker is still a very young woman, young enough to recall vividly the smell of science experiments in high school or college.

Lines 28-29

These two lines make up the shortest stanza in the poem. The section title, "Suggestion from a Friend," is indicative of the speaker's inability to explain her problems to others, even close friends. The "suggestion" here is almost accusatory, with the "friend" seeming to blame the speaker for her own depression. The implication is that if the ill individual only had faith in God's existence, then she would be cured. Since she apparently does not have that faith, the depression must be her own fault. As the speaker herself has already admitted that her "manners toward God" were "ruined," she may be struggling with feelings of guilt, resulting in a misinterpretation of the friend's suggestion.

Lines 30-35

The fourth section, titled "Often," comes closest to pathos in this poem, particularly the first three lines. The speaker lets the reader know she wants to be "adult" and "try to wait for dark" to go to bed when apparently she feels like going to bed much sooner. However, she is rescued from total self-pity in the final three lines, if by no other means than a nice metaphor. Sleep is a sanctuary for the speaker and she likens it to a "coracle," or a small boat made of waterproof material stretched over a wicker or wooden frame. In the coracle she can "push away / from the massive pain" of mental illness the same way one would push a small craft away from a troubling shore.

Lines 36-38

Line 36 moves the poem forward in time simply by revealing the speaker's age during the events of the fifth stanza. She is now in her "early thirties," and, as the title of this section ("Once There Was Light") suggests, experiences a moment of reprieve or "light." This section is one of the most highly imagistic sections of the entire piece, as it extends the metaphor of light to represent the speaker and all of humanity, and introduces a crow to represent depression. In lines 37 and 38, the speaker realizes she is a "speck of light in the great / river of light" that persists timelessly in a smooth, wavelike motion. This is the first time in the poem the speaker has anything positive to say about her position in the world or about the world in general.

Lines 39-44

These lines describe the comfort and peace of mind the speaker feels during her break from depression. She does not explicitly state how long the break lasts, but the phrase "For a few / moments I floated, completely calm" is a good indication. No matter the length of time, what is most important is the kinship she feels with "the whole / human family." She even overcomes her typical drab, gray sadness long enough to announce that "We were all colors." Line 44 provides the best insight into the speaker's sense of euphoria; for once in her life she "no longer hated having to exist."

Lines 45-49

The last stanza of "Once There Was Light" describes the speaker's return to melancholia in a very gripping metaphorical scene. She likens her depression to "a crow who smells hot blood" and hungrily rushes to retrieve her from her moments of peace in the "glowing stream" of light. Lines 48 and 49 make effective use of irony in the words melancholy uses to defend its actions. It seems the illness must *save* its human host from drowning in a sea of good health, and her response, understandably, is to weep "for days."

Lines 50-55

These six lines in the sixth section (titled "In and Out") serve to calm the poem. The domestic scene of a dog consoling its owner by simply being near is actually a pleasant one, if considered outside the melancholic premise surrounding it. One can picture the loyal canine searching the house until he finds his loving master upstairs where the dog lies down with his head touching her foot. The dog's rhythmic breathing is a comfort to the woman and she describes it with a low-key tone and soothing words: "in and out, in / and out; a pause, a long sigh." In this stanza, what the dog accomplishes for its master is what the poet accomplishes for the reader□a moment of peace and quiet in the middle of a personal storm.

Lines 56-62

In the first stanza of part seven (titled "Pardon"), the speaker returns to her dismal outlook for herself and an admission of her weariness with feigned hopefulness. She calls her body "a piece of burned meat," and then distances her *self* from what her physical being does, as though she is literally separated into warring parts. She refers to her own body as an "it," claiming that it "speaks / in my voice, dispatches obligations / haltingly, or not at all." The last three lines confess that "it" is "tired / beyond measure" of pretending that its heart is strong enough to continue.

Lines 63-66

Few words are less poetic than "monoamine oxidase inhibitors," but in this poem they work quite well. These types of medication are sometimes called the antidepressants of last resort, and the speaker's dull announcement that "We move on" to them is further indication that her struggle continues and is, perhaps, worsening. Note that she uses the plural "we" instead of "I" in the opening line of this stanza. Apparently she still feels a separation from her *self*, as implied in the previous lines, but then suddenly in line 65, she returns to addressing herself as one being: "I feel as if I had drunk six cups / of coffee, but the pain stops / abruptly." The new drugs seem to ease her depression, although they also make her feel wired.

Lines 67-72

In these lines, the speaker compares herself to a falsely-accused prisoner who suddenly finds herself pardoned and set free. One can imagine the joy of being released from jail, but one can also imagine the anger and resentment for having been wrongly locked up in the first place. The speaker's "prison" is her melancholia, and when the new antidepressants free her from it□at least for a while□ she is able to return to the things in life she was forced to neglect, from her "marriage and friends" to her "desk, books, and chair."

Lines 73-76

The uplifting end of the seventh part is shattered by the beginning of the poem's eighth part, "Credo." As its title implies, the lines reveal a statement of belief, but, unlike formal credos, the faith asserted here is not a typical religious one. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The speaker believes "only in this moment / of well-being." The allusion to religious faith comes in her comparison of mental depression to an "Unholy ghost" that she knows is "certain to come again." The "pharmaceutical wonders" are *expected* to work only temporarily.

Lines 77-83

In these lines, the speaker accuses the illness of being a "coarse, mean" individual who will come into her home and behave like a rude visitor, plopping his feet on the coffee table and leaning casually back on the couch. Just as casually, he will take away her ability to perform simple, daily functions such as speaking, sleeping, reading, and picking up the telephone to call her doctor.

Lines 84-86

The last three lines of "Credo" sum up the speaker's feelings of complete futility and utter helplessness against the disease that has plagued her all her life. She believes there is nothing she can do to prevent it from returning over and over, and line 86 eerily suggests a sacred attachment to the disease. "*When I wake, I am still with thee*" reverberates with the haunting tone of a follower addressing her god.

Lines 87-93

The title of the final section, "Wood Thrush," provides evidence of what may be the speaker's only savior. After all she has experienced, it is a simple bird that catches her most acute attention. At the outset of this stanza, she admits she is still "high" on drugs, this time naming Nardil specifically, but she also claims to be high on something else: "June light." This is unusual for someone who has never been able to enjoy the uncomplicated beauty of nature, and, even though her own state may not be so "natural," she still has cause to celebrate. While the "bile of desolation" pressed into her every pore at the beginning of the poem, it is now "easeful air" at her window that "presses through the screen," bringing the song of the wood thrush to her ears. The final phrase of line 93 clearly expresses the speaker's refreshed frame of mind as she listens to the bird singing: "I am overcome."

Lines 94-96

Precisely what has caused the speaker to be "overcome" is not as obvious as it first seems. The softness of the June morning, the joyfulness of the bird's song, or witnessing such beauties of nature coming together while many people are still asleep are all likely candidates for the speaker's sudden elation, but it is actually more□or perhaps *less*□ than that. Line 94 reveals that she is overcome "by ordinary contentment." All the common things of life most people take for granted have eluded her because of the illness. This one moment of peace that comes from listening to a bird's song may appear exaggerated, but it is indeed so important to the speaker that she must ask herself, "What hurt me so terribly / all my life until this moment?" It seems the simple song of the wood thrush has miraculously erased decades of pain, frustration, and hopelessness.

Lines 97-100

The final four lines continue the nature theme that appears only in the last ten of the 100-line poem. For the first time, the speaker uses the word "love," and it expresses her feeling for the "small, swiftly / beating heart" of the wood thrush. Even the mention of the "great maples" is a positive turnabout for the speaker, for until this point she seemed incapable of noticing, much less appreciating, the grandeur of something as ordinary and as magnificent as a tree. The last line refers to something else she loves about the bird, "its bright, unequivocal eye." The selection of the word *unequivocal* is an interesting one. Its basic meaning of something that is completely clear and unambiguous, leaving no room for doubt or misunderstanding, is likely how she would "love" to feel about her own mind, or her own *self*. Many critics and readers claim the ending of the poem is a happy one. There is probably much room for debate on that matter.

Themes

Hope and Hopelessness

Poems with subjects laid bare before the reader and with language as plain as casual conversation tend to have fairly obvious themes. "Having it Out with Melancholy" is no exception, although its premise is a little unusual. As the title suggests, there is an argument occurring between the speaker and her own mental illness, which she personifies as "melancholy." Like most quarrels, this one involves give and take, and there is a constant flux of feelings. Essentially, the speaker fluctuates be- tween hope and hopelessness□a theme, as well as a condition, that lies at the very core of clinical depression.

The poem's first four stanzas are shrouded with the dismal prospect of going from birth to death without ever having a truly good moment. The speaker literally comes out of her mother's womb already depressed. The disease lurks in her nursery, follows her through school, and acts as a wedge between her and a friend who blames the speaker's mental problems on her lack of religious faith. From melancholy's point of view, people are on earth simply to "wait for death," and the speaker just needs to accept that. Even the list of all the medications she has tried serves only as a reminder of how desperate she is to find the relief that is apparently not coming. But then, about a third of the way through the poem, she admits there was a brief time in her early thirties when she found a "light," so to speak. She herself was a "speck of light" and all humanity made up a "great / river of light," and the speaker "no longer hated having to exist." But, for the depression sufferer, hope is short-lived. Like clockwork, melancholy returns to keep the speaker from drowning in hope and happiness.

This theme of hope and hopelessness plays throughout the remainder of the poem, with the speaker eking out small reprieves from her pain, sometimes just from the steady sound of the dog's breathing. Her next brush with hopefulness comes in an artificial form, as the "pharmaceutical wonders" to which she clings allow her both time and desire to find hope in a common, yet unlikely place for someone used to only dreariness and despair: the simple song of a bird and its "bright, unequivocal eye." Concluding the poem on this note seems to grant it a happy ending, the speaker having won the argument with melancholy and triumphed over its debilitating hold on her. However, the seesaw quarrel that dominates the entire poem may indeed swing back the other way if only a few more lines are added.

Simple Pleasures

If there is a single main message in this poem, it is not revealed until the final stanza. The feeling of "ordinary contentment" is so unusual for the speaker that she claims she is "overcome" with it. After all she has endured, it is the simple pleasures□ things most people take for granted□that astound her the most. Common occurrences like birds

singing in the early morning are often overlooked by people at the start of a busy day. Instead of appreciating the daily, ordinary wonders of nature, many people spend their time waiting for a major event to occur□whether a positive event such as a raise at work, marriage, or graduation, or a negative event such as illness, loss of a job, or death. Because the speaker in this poem is so akin to negative things, she is suddenly overwhelmed by one of the most benign, commonplace happenings on the planet. She would likely trade "what hurt [her] so terribly" for a lifetime of simple contentment.

Style

Generally, lyric poetry expresses subjective thoughts and feelings, most often those based on deeply personal emotions or observations. Kenyon is recognized as a contemporary lyric poet, for her work is subjective and tends to address contemporary, everyday life. "Having it Out with Melancholy" is an example. There is no rhyme in this poem and no cadence in the line formations of "Having it Out with Melancholy." Stanza lengths are uneven, with lines containing some alliteration. The language is straightforward and conversational. One could easily type the words into prose paragraphs and read them without missing anything and without having them sound too poetic. The most intentional formatting is in balancing each section's subject with its length. Some sections require more elaboration, as in the first, fifth, seventh, eighth, and ninth parts. In these, the poet tends to explain more, to use more vivid imagery to convey her messages. The fourth and sixth sections each contain six lines and one brief, striking image.

The poem's second section, "Bottles," is unique in the poem because nearly half of it consists of a list of antidepressant medications. Presenting a run-down of pharmaceutical names helps the speaker make a point about her dependency and desperation. It also maintains the very contemporary aspects of the poem. The third section, "Suggestion from a Friend," speaks for itself. The briefest part, it may also be the most poignant. Apparently, Kenyon felt no further explanation was needed for this section.

Historical Context

The first half of the 1990s in the United States was marked by social and political volatility, from the heavily televised Gulf War and dramatic reporting from the front lines to the election of Bill Clinton as president, and the onslaught of public scandals brought to light by media exposing high-profile people in less-than-favorable circumstances. President Clinton himself was at the center of one of the most publicized sex scandals in political history when the Monica Lewinski fiasco hit the news later in the decade. Overall, the 1990s reflected the concerns of a society blessed with a period of strong economic growth and an optimism for financial gains, while at the same time besieged with doubts and cynicism toward American values that appeared to be withering into sensationalism, melodrama, and "acceptable" violence.

Although the war in Vietnam was the first conflict to be viewed in American living rooms via television, it was the 1991 Gulf War that inundated the airwaves with live broadcasts and blow-byblow accounts of the battle from newscasters who became as much a part of the drama as military personnel. People tuned in to watch the action unfold between the United States and Iraq just the same as if they were watching a major sporting event or an evening soap opera. While the question of ethics did arise in the minds of some Americans who felt the horrors of war were being overshadowed by the excitement of seeing it from a safe distance, enough people kept watching to make television news one of the biggest, most profitable "entertainment" venues of the decade.

Public officials also provided fuel for the scandal- seeking media, mostly with sexual content. In 1991, Clarence Thomas was a nominee for the United States Supreme Court when allegations he had sexually harassed employees in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) became public. Anita Hill, a former coworker of Clarence Thomas, accused the former head of the EEOC of making unwanted sexual advances, and when a judiciary committee convened for hearings on the case, it turned into a media circus. Congress had its own share of sexual harassment cases, as Senators Brock Adams and Robert Packwood and Representative Mel Reynolds were all accused of making improper advances toward women in the early 1990s. Again, the media gave these stories high priority, adding fuel to the disillusionment and emotional tensions many Americans were experiencing in the final decade of the twentieth century.

More sobering media coverage came from an amateur cameraman who in 1992 recorded the beating of a black motorist, Rodney King, by four white police officers in Los Angeles, California. The tape was broadcast over and over again on national television, enraging much of the public and kindling nationwide charges of racism against the Los Angeles Police Department. When the four officers were acquitted, rioting broke out in Los Angeles and fifty-two people died as a result. The riots were captured in graphic details on the evening news. A year later, a federal court re-tried the Rodney King case, and two of the four officers were convicted and given jail terms.

Perhaps no high-profile criminal case of the decade was as sensational and exploited as the O. J. Simpson murder trial, in which Simpson was accused of killing his ex-wife Nicole Simpson and her friend Ron Goldman. From live-action filming of the low-speed police pursuit of Simpson on a California freeway to a courtroom battle that ran through most of 1994, every moment of the trial, no matter how tedious, was broadcast on television. Attorneys on both sides became celebrities, and even their lives outside the courtroom became fair game for media attention and scrutiny. In the end, Simpson, who is black, was found not guilty, and public opinion tended to be divided along racial lines. Regardless of the race issue, however, few could deny that the overall carnival atmosphere of the trial served only to make a mockery of the American judicial system.

Along with the in-your-face broadcasting of political scandals and real-life police action during the early 1990s, Americans also endured coverage of increased violence in schools, anti-government survivalist groups that spawned the "Unabomber" and cult leader David Koresh, the bombing of the New York City World Trade Center in 1993, and the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995. Such social turmoil may have a connection to the rise in prescription drug abuse during this decade. More people began using pain relievers and tranquilizers for non-medical purposes, with increases of more than 100 percent from 1980 to 1990. While it is unlikely that publicized violence and graphic details of unscrupulous behavior can exacerbate true cases of clinical depression, perhaps it is not far-fetched to assume a connection between social upheaval and emotional stress. This is not to suggest that living in more peaceful times would have had any effect on Kenyon's□or anyone else's□struggle with mental illness. It could, however, foster fewer tendencies to turn to drugs for personal good when the world outside seems hopelessly bad.

Critical Overview

Kenyon published only four volumes of poetry in her lifetime, but each book has been well received by critics and readers in general who find her work both provocative and accessible. Most critics applaud her ability to present both everyday subjects, such as pets or New England landscapes, and serious topics, such as terminal illness and depression, in a manner that justifies their presence in the poem. "Having it Out with Melancholy" has been used as an example by more than one reviewer, and the book in which it was first published, *Constance*, was one of her most highly acclaimed. Writing for *American Poetry Review*, critic Robin Becker claims that "Kenyon writes with a spare authority, her collection peppered with the language of hymn, psalm, and prayer. . . . [Her] intimacy with rural New England provides stunning and consoling imagery, even as she writes of illness and the death of loved ones." A review of *Constance* in *Publishers Weekly* states that "The cumulative effect of these quiet, unassuming poems lingers long after this slim volume is closed. . . . [Kenyon] writes, in addition to illness, of sleep, insomnia and death. She interacts with the insects, birds and flowers in her New Hampshire landscape, relying on their fragility to teach her of her own." Even prior to her final volume, Kenyon was already producing work that achieved the same "cumulative effect" that critics recognized in *Constance*. Writing about her 1990 collection, *Let Evening Come*, critic Robin Latimer discusses a poem in which a "contemplative but disciplined speaker" who has just learned of a loved one's cancer "retains the capacity to 'snap the blue leash onto the D-ring / of the dog's collar,' to attend to 'that part of life / [which] is intact.'" Latimer goes on to note that the act of dog-walking is used as a "simple image of coping, of the mind strolling with itself as it waits for what the speaker dreads." Just as in section 6 of "Having it Out with Melancholy," the simple pleasure of taking care of a pet is both commonplace and vital to this poet, and critics acknowledge the repetition of similar images in Kenyon's work as much as self-induced therapy as a signature theme. Ultimately, it is Kenyon's mixture of soft language and tough topics that attracts both critics and readers and sets her apart from other poets who tend to lapse into sentimentality or anger when addressing such personal problems.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill suggests that religious faith and personal spirituality play a much greater role in this poem than is obvious on its surface or in the speaker's actual statements.

The issue of religion in "Having it Out with Melancholy" appears minor in comparison to the overriding descriptions of and meditations on what life is like for a woman suffering from severe depression. By far, the themes in this poem center on the speaker's desperate attempt to be *normal*, to go through a day without sadness and dread, a day without hopelessness and drugs that sometimes work and sometimes do not. Her consideration of religious faith seems fleeting, at best, even cynical, as she bluntly announces her friend's opinion that she "wouldn't be so depressed" if only she believed in God. She allows this reprimand only two lines, then dismisses it to return to further lamentation on her own misery. Perhaps this summation is too hasty and based only on the poem's surface, or on what the speaker says instead of what she implies. A closer look may reveal that these two lines are the most powerful in the entire work and that spirituality is actually a primary concern of the woman's, as evidenced by the religious imagery and innuendoes she scatters throughout this story of her tragic life.

It seems that, since birth, the cards of gloom have been stacked against this speaker who claims she belonged more to depression's "anti-urge" than to her mother as an infant. The entire first section hangs on the notion that memories from the crib really do exist and that some are so strong, so torturous, that the grown-up can recall them vividly even at the distance of middle age. Also, in this first part, the speaker sneaks in the first allusion to religious piety, professing that her "manners toward God" were "ruined" in childhood and blaming depression for destroying them. What *manners* does she mean? It is an odd term to apply to one's relationship with a supreme being, but, in the sense that this is a child's relationship, the word likely implies a little girl's obedience and good behavior toward such things as saying her prayers or not giggling in church or in believing Heaven is a beautiful, gilded city somewhere above the clouds. Because her manners are ruined, she does not believe in anything other than sadness, despair, and eventual death. At least, that is what she would have her readers presume.

The speaker makes no more mention of God or religious faith until the two little lines that make up section three of the poem. The message in them comes as somewhat a shock for its abrupt, almost brutal context, but here again the speaker implies, through the words of her friend, that she has no faith in God. Then, the subject is dropped as quickly as it arises, but that may be misleading. The speaker returns to the subject□if not specifically, then emblematically□by the end of her story. So, too, will this writing.

First, it is interesting to take a look at other religious allusions that appear in the poem, such as in the fifth section in which the speaker employs symbols of light and darkness, peace and violence to describe a time of welcomed reprieve in her ongoing battle with mental illness. She imagines herself "a speck of light in the great / river of light," a

metaphor seemingly built around images of God or Christ whose presence glows, emanating upon human beings who are faithful followers. Her moment in the light of a supreme being is cut short by the return of melancholy, represented this time by a "crow who smells hot blood." Crows, of course, are black, and they often symbolize the dark presence of evil or some lurking terror. The speaker's peace of mind, then, is wrenched from her the way a demonic creature may yank a helpless victim from the godlike "glowing stream" in which she finally feels secure. Even the words she attributes to melancholy—"'I'll hold you up. I never let my dear / ones drown!'"—sound as though they could come from the mouth of God in a modern interpretation of the Bible. The irony, of course, is that this time the savior is more like Satan.

Other than section three, the strongest suggestions regarding religion and spirituality in this poem appear in section eight, the very name of which may be a direct reference to the Apostles of Christ. One definition of "credo" is simply "creed," which usually implies a formal statement of religious belief or an open confession of faith. But, "Credo," when capitalized, refers to the "Apostle's Creed," or the Christian system of belief as ascribed to the twelve Apostles and often used in some church services today. The statements that make up this section may be seen as the speaker's confession of what she believes in, and she appears forthright about it: "I believe only in this moment / of well-being." The defiance in these words is unmistakable. Believing only in the moment at hand directly conflicts with the Christian notion of having faith in eternity, but the speaker explains her reasoning just as candidly as she states her creed: "Unholy ghost, / you are certain to come again." Notice the explicit allusion to spirituality here, as the woman compares her illness to the anti-Christ, or the polar opposite of the Holy Ghost. She accuses depression of being like a demonic force, able to possess her and turn her "into someone who can't / take the trouble to speak; someone / who can't sleep, or who does nothing / but sleep." In other words, she is completely helpless against this demon that has taken over her mind and, apparently, her soul. She plucks language and tone straight from the Bible in her final resigning line: "*When I awake, I am still with thee*."

"Having it Out with Melancholy" may end on a more positive note than it begins, but the continuous roller coaster ride of clinical depression makes it clear that a downhill dip is just around the corner. The speaker must find something beyond her own physical being, beyond the chemical make-up of her brain in order, simply, to live. This brings readers back to section three—that tiny part of the poem that holds the weight of its message. The suggestion from a friend obviously implies that the speaker does not really believe in God, but the contention of this essay is that she really *does*. She spends too much time in the poem making references to religious entities and spiritual needs not to have them count for something—for quite a lot, actually. Section three is brief for a reason: it says it all. It encompasses what is at the heart of the speaker's most basic concern and her most dire need: finding comfort in a world of personal torture, reaching a spiritual heaven in spite of her physical and mental hell. So, this section is ultimately ironic. If she did not believe in God, she would not waste time agonizing over the gulf that the illness has created between her *real* self—the happy, content, and spiritual individual she wants to be— and the tired, disillusioned woman she sees in the mirror most every day. If she did not believe in God, then bringing up the subject, from childhood through adulthood, would not be necessary. But, the memories

she describes and the thoughts she confesses clearly indicate that the subjects of God and personal spirituality are foremost in this speaker's troubled mind.

Looking at "Having it Out with Melancholy" from the religious perspective provides a possible alternative to a context that seems overburdened with one sad detail after another of the speaker's life and her battle with depression. Without an underlying theme, the poem may falter into a somber diary of a woman's chronic problems, as benign and defeating as the list of prescription drugs that makes up half of section two. But, much more is going on in this poem, and the main theme of how important it is to recognize the beauty and peacefulness in something as natural and simple as a bird's song is complemented well by the role that personal faith may play in that recognition. It is, after all, the *unequivocal* eye of the wood thrush that the speaker claims to love, and this notion of having no doubts, no ambiguities, must be one she would love to apply to her *self* as well.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Having it Out with Melancholy," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Covintree is a graduate of Randolph-Macon Women's College with a degree in English. In this essay, Covintree examines the connection between faith and mental illness discussed in the poem, focusing primarily on Kenyon's choice of three section titles.

Carefully divided into nine sections, Jane Kenyon's poem, "Having it Out with Melancholy," from her 1993 collection entitled *Constance*, is a personal and detailed account of living with depression. Throughout the poem, Kenyon marries this struggle with concepts that surround the understanding of faith. Kenyon writes that depression and faith are linked and connected. However, she appears to be unclear in her conclusions about this connection. Does she believe, as the third section suggests through its one couplet, that one's strong faith can heal depression? Is Kenyon's point that treasuring the simple moments during depression, like following the dog's breathy rhythm found in section six, brings greater peace than any ritual of faith? Or, is it her main purpose to show depression and faith as almost synonymous forces at work in one's life since, as the first section states, birth? Instead of focusing on one possibility, she introduces various relationships. In this way, the emphasis is not on the cause and effect of these two almost intangibles, but the fact that both faith and mental illness can be connected in any number of ways. Kenyon makes this deliberate connection to show the mystery both hold within the experience of living. One way she does this is through the titles of her sections. Three of the nine sections are titled with religious terminology. By titling one third of her sections with terms commonly used in religious circles, Kenyon demonstrates the connection of faith and depression as a strong emphasis in the poem.

The first section with a title of religious inference is section 5. Kenyon titles this section, "Once There Was Light," preparing the reader for an experience of creation or epiphany. Perhaps her story will be like the one told in Genesis in the Bible and surely with the light will come a revelation. What does come with this section is Kenyon's most upbeat and optimistic of all her nine sections. The light that she is writing about is a moment of amazing clarity, where she is removed from her mental illness and connected to every other being. Here, she is removed from her melancholy and brought to "the great / river of light that undulates through time."

What she then describes in this river could be seen as an image of Heaven:

I was floating with the whole
human family. We were all colors□those
who are living now, those who have died,
those who are not yet born.

In her enlightened state, she can see those who came before her and those who will follow. She can see her place in the picture of creation and the beauty of the shared experience of life and faith. In addition, she is "completely calm" in this experience and "no longer hate[s] having to exist." Kenyon is writing of a perfect experience, in many

ways an experience of Heaven. In the first three stanzas of the poem, she is removed from struggle and granted peace.

This section was based on a true experience for Kenyon. As she said to Bill Moyers in a 1993 interview that can be found in her book *A Hundred White Daffodils*, "I really had a vision of that once.... I relaxed into existence in a way that I never had before." This heaven-like vision allowed her the opportunity to appreciate the world in which she lived and remove herself from the confines of depression. In the Bill Moyers interview, she continues to clarify the image by saying that "after having this wave of buoyant emotion, my understanding was changed fundamentally." Yet, even with this changed understanding and her image of an euphoric heaven, Kenyon ends this fifth section with an abrupt removal out of the experience.

According to the Bill Moyers interview in *A Hundred White Daffodils*, Kenyon herself supposed that this change was due to a bad crash following an episode of mania. Still, Kenyon leaves this final stanza in this section and compares her illness to a black crow pulling her out of her few moments of clarity. She personifies depression as a crow "who smells hot blood," and then talks with the crow as if they have a personal relationship. Kenyon shows herself to have a personal relationship to depression and not, as the third section advised, with God. It appears in this stanza that depression has become the unknown force in which Kenyon is forced to believe. The crow acts as a savior, rescuing the speaker from "the glowing stream" and reasons to the speaker that he is saving her from drowning, "'I'll hold you up. I never let my dear / ones drown!'" Yet, neither the reader nor the speaker wants to be pulled away or saved by this force because this rescue removes the peace and reinstates melancholy. Though Kenyon has been given a life-altering experience and a glimpse at Heaven, she has been brought by her illness back to a state of despair.

It is in this despair that Kenyon begins her first stanza of the section titled "Pardon." Thus titled, the reader awaits the absolution, forgiveness, and perhaps penance. Before the pardon, the speaker must confess to what pains her or perhaps, one could say, her "sins." Sin can be viewed as separation from God. Kenyon shows depression to be a separation from self. While depressed, the speaker sees herself as "[a] piece of burned meat" who is "tired of trying / to be stouthearted, tired / beyond measure." This is Kenyon's confession to the debilitating effect that this illness places on her and her life. This first stanza reiterates the speaker's struggle with her separation from self (and from God) that is shown throughout the first four sections of this poem. By placing the pardon in the second half of the poem (and the second half of this section), she begins to bring relief.

As a condition of the pardon, her penance is in the form of the "monoamine oxidase inhibitors." As in the poem's second section, the speaker is again at the mercy of prescribed cures for her illness. By placing these drugs in the section called "Pardon," Kenyon parallels the day to day use of drugs to a minister's advice for removing oneself from sinful behavior. These prescriptions remove the pain and the sin "[of] a crime she did not commit." Kenyon is grateful for the relief the penance of drugs brings. Yet, she

views this pardon as partially undeserved, resenting the way depression removed her from life without her consent or permission.

She has been isolated, and now with the assistance of drugs, can return to the normalcy of life. With this, forgiveness comes. The speaker finds solace in the common parts of life. Forgiveness comes in the small and detailed portions; "marriage and friends . . . pink fringed hollyhocks . . . desk, books, and chair."

Once in drug therapy, she can see clearly what it is she believes in, and so her next section begins. Kenyon titles section 8 "Credo," and with this, a Christian reader might await a litany of what Kenyon believes, like creeds found in so many churches. What Kenyon gives, however is not a list of several beliefs, but belief in one thing "this moment / of well being." In making her belief compromise the second line and part of the third of the first stanza in the section, Kenyon gives the reader her belief for only a moment. It is obviously the moment that is so important to her. In section 5, Kenyon's calm comes only "[f]or a few / moments." In section 9, the moment will return as "ordinary contentment." This well-being is brief and unpredictable, but it is where Kenyon maintains her faith.

Kenyon begins to resign herself to the constancy of her depression and to the brief moments of release she will have from it. In her "An Interview with Bill Moyers" found in *A Hundred White Daffodils*, Kenyon connects her belief in the moment with her belief in God. In this interview she says, "[w]hen you get to be my age and you've lived with depression for a number of years, you begin to have a context for believing that you will feel better at some point." In this way, she resolves herself to her illness and to God's presence in this. In the same Moyers interview, Kenyon states that when depressed she can think about faith by calling out to God, and these moments of being better or even the belief that she will feel better eventually become the answer from God. In this way, Kenyon reveals to the reader "a God who, if you ask, forgives you no matter how far down in the well you are." This is the God she tells Moyers in the interview she was introduced to in her later years.

These moments of absolution must sustain her through her illness, because as the section suggests, depression becomes the "[u]nholy ghost . . . certain to come again." Kenyon shows there is nothing redeemable about depression. She personifies depression as "[c]oarse, mean" and immobilizing. Depression is ever present. The speaker says "[t]here is nothing I can do / against your coming." Yet, by titling the section "Credo," Kenyon shifts the focus from the paralysis of depression to the possibility of clarity in the future. The illness is not a punishment from God but something that God will help her overcome.

"Having it Out with Melancholy" is an intensely intimate observation of Kenyon's relationship to mental illness. Her carefully crafted language describes the various conflicts and connections between mental illness, traditional beliefs, and personal experience. Though personal to her, these nine sections provide universal insights into the struggles of the mentally ill. In the process, she offers hope through her keen

attention to the simple details like, God, dogs, and a wood thrush, hope that can help every person survive.

Source: Kate Covintree, Critical Essay on "Having it Out with Melancholy," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Adaptations

Journalist Bill Moyers hosted a film called *A Life Together: Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon*. It was first broadcast on PBS in December 1993. The tape, recorded by Films for Humanities, Inc., won an Emmy award in 1994 and features a discussion with Hall and Kenyon. In the film, Kenyon reads parts of "Having it Out with Melancholy" and other poems.

An audiocassette simply called "Jane Kenyon" was recorded in 1987 by the University of Missouri. The twenty-seven-minute tape features Kenyon reading poems from *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, as well as an interview recorded at her home in New Hampshire.

Topics for Further Study

Which of the nine numbered sections of "Having it Out with Melancholy" do you think is the strongest in terms of poetic value and in conveying the poet's message? Give specific reasons and examples from the section to support your choice.

Do you think this poem has a happy ending? Why or why not?

Research the symptoms and treatment of clinical depression and manic depression? How do people suffering from clinical depression differ from those suffering from manic depression? How does treatment differ, if at all?

Give examples of "ordinary contentment" that you have experienced and explain why simplicity is sometimes hard to come by in contemporary American life.

Kenyon came to rely on monoamine oxidase inhibitors to help ease the severity of her depression. What do these drugs do to the human brain?

After the events of September 11, 2001, many Americans and people throughout the world claim to be more depressed and anxious, including those who say they have not had those feelings before to any abnormal extent. What is the difference between this kind of depression and that which is diagnosed as "clinical?" Which is more prevalent and why?

How might one reconcile the dilemma presented in the statement, "You wouldn't be so depressed if you really believed in God?" Would people of various faiths respond differently? Give some examples of how two or three different religions might approach the issue of believing in God and still suffering from a chronic malady. Conduct research to support your findings.

What Do I Read Next?

Kenyon's first poetry collection, *From Room to Room*, was published in 1978. It is interesting to contrast the poems in this early volume to the much darker, despairing ones in her later work. Themes in this collection center on the beauty of nature, the tranquility of country life, and gardening, instead of depression, illness, and death.

Maxine Kumin's collection of poems entitled *The Long Marriage* (2002) addresses her relationship with her husband of more than fifty years along with her "marriage" to poetry and her "marriage" to nature. Like Kenyon, Kumin has spent much of her life in rural New Hampshire. Her poems also deal with personal tragedy but in a remarkably different way from Kenyon's poems.

First-time author Jeffrey Smith's candid memoir called *Where the Roots Reach for Water: A Personal and Natural History of Melancholia* (1999) is a provocative examination of melancholia. When one antidepressant after another fails to relieve his symptoms, Smith decides to try to live with his depression, and this book is a fascinating account of the results of that decision.

Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison, professor of medicine, is a world-renowned expert on manic depression. In her 1995 publication *An Unquiet Mind*, she provides a personal testimony of her own struggle since adolescence with the disease and how it has shaped her life. Jamison writes with vivid prose, wit, and even humor, making this highly complex and misunderstood subject accessible to anyone who wants to learn more about it.

Further Study

Hall, Donald, *Without: Poems*, Mariner Books, 1999.

Published after the death of his wife (Kenyon), the poems in this Donald Hall collection are all dedicated to the memory of Kenyon and their life together. Poem titles include "Her Long Illness," "Last Days," "Letter after a Year," and "Weeds and Peonies."

Hornback, Bert G., ed., *"Bright Unequivocal Eye": Poems, Papers, and Remembrances from the First Jane Kenyon Conference*, Peter Lang, 2000.

This book contains a collection of writings by poets and teachers who attended a 1998 conference held in honor of Kenyon in Louisville, Kentucky. The essays include such topics as "Our Lady of Sorrows: Some Thoughts on Jane Kenyon," "Affective Disorders: The Treatment of Emotion in Jane Kenyon's Poetry," and "The Interior Garden in Jane Kenyon's Poetry." The title of this book is derived from the last line of "Having it Out with Melancholy."

Kenyon, Jane, *A Hundred White Daffodils: Essays, the Akhmatova Translations, Newspaper Columns, Notes, Interviews, and One Poem*, Graywolf Press, 1999.

As the title suggests, this posthumous collection contains a miscellany of Kenyon's writing, including essays about her small country community, working in her garden, and a candid examination of what it is like to live with a terminal illness. There are also translations of some of the works of Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, and one of Kenyon's own unfinished poems.

□, *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems*, Graywolf Press, 1996.

The poems for this collection were selected in 1995 by Kenyon on her deathbed, with the assistance of her husband (poet Donald Hall). It includes poems from her first four books, as well as twenty previously uncollected poems.

Bibliography

Becker, Robin, "*Constance* (book reviews)," in *American Poetry Review*, Vol. 23, No. 6, November-December 1994, p. 23.

Kenyon, Jane, *Constance*, Graywolf Press, 1993.

□, "An Interview with Bill Moyers," in *A Hundred White Daffodils*, Graywolf Press, 1999, pp. 145-71

Latimer, Robin M., "Jane Kenyon," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 120: *American Poets Since World War II, Third Series*, edited by R. S. Gwynn, Gale Research, 1992, pp. 172-75.

Review of *Constance*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 240, No. 28, July 12, 1993, p. 75.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Poetry for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

©1997-2002; ©2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc.

Gale and Design® and Thomson Learning™ are trademarks used herein under license.

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any

form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

For permission to use material from this product, submit your request via Web at http://www.gale-edit.com/permissions, or you may download our Permissions Request form and submit your request by fax or mail to:

Permissions Department
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Permissions Hotline:
248-699-8006 or 800-877-4253, ext. 8006
Fax: 248-699-8074 or 800-762-4058

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, The Gale Group, Inc. does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. The Gale Group, Inc. accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535