Horizons of Rooms Study Guide

Horizons of Rooms by W. S. Merwin

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Introduction

"The Horizons of Rooms," from W. S. Merwin's 1988 collection *The Rain In the Trees*, published in New York City, is a solid example of the late style of one of the twentieth century's most influential poets. Merwin's work began in his postcollege years in the 1950s with a strong, intellectual mastery of the classical poetic forms. By the time of his 1967 collection, *The Lice*, he had developed a unique voice: terse and angry, the poems in this collection did without punctuation, as if what they had to say was too overwhelmingly personal for the writer to bother with conventions of grammar. *The Lice* was Merwin's best-known book, with over a dozen reprintings, leading a generation of poets in the late 1960s and early 1970s to copy his style to express their own social concerns. Merwin's later poetry shifted its focus toward the destruction of the environment and began showing more and more rumination on history, especially natural history. These subjects are explored in "The Horizons of Rooms."

This poem reflects on the way humanity has come to accept the concept of "rooms" as a defining part of existence, blocking out any sense of nature in the process. It reminds readers that rooms have actually been in existence for just a small fraction of the large scope of world history and gives an example of how making a room in a cave allowed for survival in prehistoric times. The problem, as Merwin presents it, is that people no longer see nature for what it is, only that it is outside of rooms, making even the widest open places just an interlude between one room and another. "Many have forgotten the sky," the poem tells readers, and the problem is getting worse every day.

Author Biography

William Stanley Merwin was born on September 30, 1927, in New York City. His father was a Presbyterian minister. He was raised in Union City, New Jersey, and then in Scranton, Pennsylvania. In the 1940s, he attended Princeton University, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1947 and going on for just one year toward his graduate degree in modern languages. It was at Princeton that Merwin began writing poetry, with the encouragement of the noted literary figures R. P. Blackmur, Herman Bloch, and the poet John Berryman. He left there for Europe, where he earned his living for several years as a language tutor, living in France and Spain and Majorca. From 1951 to 1954, he lived in London and worked as a translator for the British Broadcasting Corporation. Once his reputation as a poet and translator began to build, Merwin returned to the United States, first living in Cambridge, Massachusetts (where he became acquainted with such giants of American poetry as Sylvia Plath, Adrianne Rich, Donald Hall, and Robert Lowell), and then in New York City. For a while in the 1960s, he lived in the rural area near Lyon in the south of France, which he was later to write about in the memoir *The Lost Upland* and the poetry collection *The Vixen*. In the 1970s, Merwin moved to Hawaii. The concern for nature and the ecology that shows throughout his poetry is reflected in his life in Haiku, Hawaii, where he lives on a former pineapple plantation that he has worked to restore to its original rainforest condition.

Merwin has been an influential force in American poetry since the publication of his first collection, *A Mask for Janus*, in 1954. *A Mask for Janus* was selected by W. H. Auden to be part of the Yale Series of Young Poets. (Merwin himself is the judge for this award today.) Since then, he has gone on to publish many collections, including 1988's *The Rain In the Trees*, in which "Horizons of Rooms" was published. Other honors that he has received include fellowships from the Rockefeller Institute, the Ford Foundation, and the National Institute of Arts and Letters; fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Academy of Poets; and almost all major awards available to poets, including the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, the Tanning Prize, the Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Award, and the Pulitzer Prize in 1970. In 1999-2000, he served as a special consultant to the poet laureate of the United States, Robert Pinsky. He has published dozens of books of poetry, as well as numerous works of translations and histories of places where he has lived, including Pennsylvania, France, and Hawaii. His poetic style has evolved from strict formal poetry that he wrote fresh out of college to the current work, which uses little traditional structure and concentrates on his growing sense of history and a spiritual connection to the land. His most recent collection of poetry is *The River Sounds* published in 1999.

Poem Text

There have been rooms for such a short time
and now we think there is nothing else unless it is
raining

or snowing or very late
with everyone else in another dark room

for a time beyond measure there were no rooms
and now many have forgotten the sky

the first room was made of stone and ice
and a fallen tree

with a heart beating in the room
and it was the ice that echoed it

because of a room a heart was born
in a room

and saw everything as a room
even what is called landscape

the present mountains were seen between moments
of remembering a room at another time

now there are more every year who remember
childhood as a room
in which the person they were is thinking of a
forest

but the first hands and first voices emerge in a
room
with a ceiling

and later in another room
that ceiling appears again without the hands or
voices

it is a room with an echoing wall
of ice

by now most sleeping is done in rooms
or on doorsteps leading to rooms

and the products of rooms
are carried on foot into the final uplands

we meet in a room
and go on from room to room

once there is a room
we know there was something before

and we go on living in the room as it has become
by good fortune

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Plot Summary

Lines 1-6

The main ideas of "The Horizons of Rooms" are introduced in the poem's first line, with a sharp directness that serves to catch readers off guard. The poem uses the familiar, comfortable word "room," but it quickly makes clear that it means more by this word than the way that it is commonly used. Readers can tell that they need to think in broader terms when the poem tells them that rooms have existed "for such a short time": "Such" usually limits "a short time" to seconds or minutes, but such an idea conflicts with any possible definition of "rooms." Rooms have been around for a long time, and calling their existence short draws a comparison to the time before recorded history when humans did not live indoors at all. This idea sets the poem in historical terms of centuries and eons, broadening the idea of "rooms" to the varieties of caves, tents, huts, or anything else that could be called a room throughout the span of time.

The second line hints at the reason why humans never really consider the rooms in which they live. Living in rooms is so thoroughly familiar that it is taken for granted. The only times that people become aware of being confined to indoor living are when they are unable to go outside, such as when it is raining or snowing. The line break from lines 3 to 4 is a run-on line, meaning that it carries the thought over with just the slight pause required by returning to the poem's left-hand margin but without any punctuation. Here, the run-on line is used to make readers think two different ideas about one phrase. In one sense, "or very late" can be read as the third example of a situation that would make people stay in their rooms, similar to the rain and snow already mentioned. Whereas rain and snow present natural dangers, this phrase introduces the ways society makes it dangerous to leave rooms, implying that there is a time, beyond late night that is "too" late, when criminals lurk. Reading beyond the line break, however, creates the phrase "very late with everyone else in another room." This line conjures an image of some lonesome person sitting in the darkness, contemplating familiar objects, such as the walls of a room, isolated from the people that they live with. The first sense of "very late" presents a world outside that is dangerous and confining; the second describes a person suffering from a social separation that is personal and psychological.

Lines 5 and 6 return to the main theme, which was merely implied in the first two lines, making those points more directly. The phrase "time beyond measure" clarifies what the poem meant earlier when it said that rooms have existed for "such a short time," and the phrase "many have forgotten the sky" restates the idea that, regarding rooms, "we can think of nothing else."

Lines 7-10

The geological sense that the poem has applied to the word "room" is raised again in line 7, which describes the first room as a cave, presumably during the Ice Age. Here, the poem shows a distinction between what it means by the word "room" and shelters that occur in nature. The cave described in line 7 is just a place with stone and ice, but the addition of a fallen tree in line 8 implies that humans added to what was already there, dragging the tree from where it fell to block the mouth of the cave, making the room complete.

In line 9, the poem balances its images drawn from nature with a reminder of the human presence in the room, representing human life with one of its most common bodily functions, the beating of a heart. The close relationship between nature and humans is implied symbolically in line 10, with the heartbeat of a human echoing off the wall of ice, showing that each is as responsible as the other for the sound that enlivens the room. Merwin uses irony here by linking the life-sustaining heartbeat to ice, which is usually associated with coldness, immobility, and death.

Lines 11-16

Continuing with its historical perspective, the poem focuses on the how the shelter of rooms enabled humanity to survive. Line 11 explains that people could give birth safely once they were able to do so inside. In line 12, though, the poem reverses this view of the room providing security and, instead, makes it seem somehow threatening by repeating the word "room." The unnecessary addition of the phrase "in a room" so soon after the last use of the word indicates how the idea of the room insinuated itself into human consciousness, becoming present in all aspects of life for people millions of years ago. In lines 13 and 14, the poem asserts that humans came to see everything as a room, even the landscape. This is a reversal of the normal understanding of these ideas, because landscapes are generally thought of as being, by definition, open and natural, whereas rooms are closed and indoors.

Merwin explains how the landscape is seen as a room in lines 15 and 16, changing the concept of a room's enclosure from the physical space that it generally connotes to a segment of time. In human minds, the mountains mentioned in line 15 are squeezed between ideas of rooms, confined between one memory of a room and another because the minds of humans are so filled with thoughts of rooms.

Lines 17-18

In the poem's most psychologically complex stanza, Merwin combines memory, identity, and metaphysics. In contrast to the previous stanzas, which discussed the development of ideas from their earliest forms, this stanza uses the present tense voice to describe human thought today. More and more people remember childhood as being a room, the poem says. Rather than just restating the idea that people see things in terms of the

rooms that they live in, though, the poem adds a twist in line 18. The idea of childhood as a room is one that these people have after they have grown up, and within that idea they have another, the idea of sitting in that room and thinking of a forest. The poem does not imply that these people could ever have gone to the forest, or even that they may have seen the forest from their childhood rooms, but only that the forest existed within their memories of when they were young.

Lines 19-22

These two stanzas continue with the memory begun in the stanza that preceded them. They describe the world from a baby's perspective, with "the first hands and the first voices" representing the child's initial contact with other humans, mentioning the ceiling that the baby, lying on his or her back, would see beyond the people who hover over its head. The use of the word "emerge" gives this memory a particularly vague quality, like the forest that the person is said to remember thinking about in line 18: the memories show up from nowhere in particular and can disappear just as suddenly. Lines 20 and 21 describe a grown person, later in life, lying back and staring at the ceiling, much in the same way that the baby did, but in different circumstances. In the same way that the poem travels back to a time when the human race first started to use rooms, these lines travel back to one person's awareness of ceilings.

Lines 23-24

Lines 23 and 24 serve to remind readers that this person's experience of the ceiling is the same as the one that the first person in a room, giving birth in a cave millions of years ago, went through.

Lines 25-28

Line 25 serves to remind readers of how infrequent the practice of sleeping outdoors has become. This might seem an obvious and inconsequential fact, but it fits with the historical perspective that the poem has provided up to this point. Though rooms are millions of years old, people still frequently slept outside, at least on special occasions, such as vacations, or during hot weather, until fairly recently. The number of people sleeping outside has dwindled "by now" to a small minority. The second function of line 25 is to remind readers, through the mention of sleep, of the "unconsciousness" motif that was first introduced in line 17 as a hazy memory. Line 26 shows a social conscience by remembering the homeless, who live on the streets and sleep in doorways. Whereas most of this poem views society's debt to rooms as a mixed blessing at best, this line shows the homeless aspiring to be room dwellers, sleeping next to rooms that they are not allowed to enter.

Lines 27 and 28 describe the spread of civilization, which is represented by rooms and the products that are manufactured indoors, into areas that have not previously been civilized. The uncivilized areas are identified as being remote and hard to access or else

inhabited by poor people who do not own any methods of transportation so that they have to transport the manufactured items by foot. This line refers to "the final uplands," which is echoed later in Merwin's career in the title of his 1992 book about the ancient farming communities around the Dorgdone River in France, *The Lost Upland*. The word "uplands" is mostly used in rural societies to describe either land that is at a higher elevation (which would echo the mention of mountains in line 15) or to describe land that is inland, away from oceans, and thus more difficult for colonists to reach with their man-made products.

Lines 29-34

The last three stanzas of the poem can be seen as a summary of the ideas that have been presented before. Lines 29 and 30 repeat the idea of a room being a starting place, which is expressed earlier in the poem with the image of a child being born in a cave during the Ice Age. The "we" in this line might be a contemporary gathering that actually would convene in a "meeting room," but it also could serve as a statement on civilized society. The fact that, as line 30 puts it, we "go on from room to room," is a restatement of the earlier idea that any one human is accustomed to having one ceiling after another over her or his head from birth.

Lines 31 and 32 repeat the idea of memory that was raised in line 17, implying that humans have some innate knowledge of what life was millions of years ago, before there were rooms. As it is stated here, the idea makes sense: These lines do not pretend to tell readers what they might remember about the time before rooms but only state the probable fact that a person entering a room might, on some unconscious level, register some curiosity about what existed on that land long before it was cultivated for human use.

The poem's final two lines raise a tone that is at odds with everything else it says. There is nothing in the previous thirty-two lines that would lead readers to believe that "living in the room" can be construed as "good fortune." On the contrary, most of the poem indicated that rooms are a curse, if only because they isolate humanity from the real world. If the poem's last line is to be accepted as being sincere, then the good fortune of living in the room can only be meant in contrast to the worse fate of what life would be without the shelter that human beings need. This sense of "good fortune" is foreshadowed earlier by the assertion in lines 11 and 12 that giving birth in a room allowed for a successful childbirth and, in line 26, by mention of the hopeful who would like so much to be in a room that they will sleep as close to it as they can get, on doorsteps.

Themes

Man versus Nature

"The Horizons of Rooms" makes a clear distinction between humanity and nature, showing how the two initially worked in cooperation but drifted apart over the centuries. In this poem, a room means any indoor space that is made by human control. It does not have to be entirely manufactured but can show as little human interference as moving a fallen tree to block the opening of a natural cave foundation.

According to the history that Merwin presents here, the early relationship between humans and nature was a mutually beneficial one. Nature provided shelter, as the poem describes in the sixth stanza, where the poem credits the cave with *causing* a child's birth. The human in the cave gives nature life, with heartbeats echoing off the cave's ice. In the beginning, at least, when humans were thought to be less mentally complex, there was a close bond between nature and man.

This relationship is shown to have evolved, however, as humans began taking control of their environment and creating rooms where they could live comfortably. Eventually, nature has become little more than a dim memory, and humans can see nothing surrounding themselves except rooms. They even see the widest open areas in terms of the rooms that they have seen last or are going to see next.

The end of the poem is ambiguous about the current relationship between humanity and nature. Taken literally, it says that humans are fortunate to be sheltered from nature. The poem does indicate, in several places, the dangers of nature, but for the most part it views humanity's isolation from nature with regret. The "good fortune" referred to in the last stanza can only be good when compared with an implied worse fate that would befall humans if they were not living indoors.

Security

The poem implies that the reason humanity has taken to living in rooms is for security, for shelter from the elements of raw nature. It is very clear about the fact that, millions of years ago, the birth it describes would not have been completed successfully if it had not occurred in a room. This single instance can easily be expanded to stand for all births and the vulnerability of humans when they are born. In the present day, as the poem points out in the first and second stanzas, people use rooms to protect themselves from rain and snow. The sense of security humanity derives from rooms is made most obvious in the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth lines, which mention people sleeping "on doorsteps leading to rooms," implying their desperation to be inside. The security that rooms offer is not without its drawbacks, though, because it makes people think in terms of man-made ceilings instead of the natural sky that their ancestors

looked up at. This, however, is given as a fact of modern life that may be regretted but cannot be ignored.

Nostalgia

The word "nostalgia" is often used casually to refer to fond memories of something that one has experienced. It does not draw off one's personal experience, though: People can have a nostalgic longing for some bygone era that happened before they were born. This kind of vague longing is described in "The Horizons of Rooms," which describes a feeling that all humans have for things that they know their ancestors experienced millions of years ago. In line 11, Merwin presents one particular scene from millions of years ago, the birth of a child, and then he echoes that experience in a modern situation, with a newborn looking up at the hands and voices and a ceiling beyond them. The connection is made even more explicit when the poem gives the modern room a facet that the prehistoric room had, a wall of ice that sound bounces off.

An idea of this sort, which is familiar to people across different ages and in different countries, is called an "archetype." The word came to literary criticism from psychology, particularly from the work of Carl Jung, who theorized that the experiences of ancestors would still resonate in their descendents in hidden memories, or a "collective unconscious." In this poem, Merwin presents modern humans as being familiar with the experiences of the past and as longing for things that members of the race experienced, even if they did not have those experiences themselves.

The poem's nostalgic element can be seen in the way that modern humans feel about their memories, viewing them with sadness and longing. In the eighth stanza, there is an aura of regret about the way humans are so far removed from nature that they do not even have memories about forests but only remember having ideas about forests. The poem focuses readers' attention on things that are gone or are soon to go: "[M]any have forgotten the sky," it explains, and "most sleeping is done in rooms." Near the end, the poem explicitly states why humans are nostalgic for the way the world once was, when it says that, wherever there is a room, "we know there was something before."

Alienation

The problem with rooms, as this poem presents it, is that they alienate humanity from the real world. In the very first stanza, it makes rooms seem minor and inconsequential in the larger scope of time, but it also shows humans to be mistaken about their importance because "we think there is nothing else." Much of the subsequent poem serves to remind readers of the richness of nature that exists outside of rooms: rain, snow, trees, sky, mountains, and even the remote upland areas that have not yet been civilized. Whereas rooms originally coexisted with nature, as in the example of the ancient room made of stone, ice, and a fallen tree, people currently use the concept of rooms to separate themselves from nature. They stay inside, alienated. As the fifteenth stanza puts it, "we meet in a room / and go on from room to room." The vastness of

nature has been scaled down, so that even the mountains, the landscape, and the horizon are thought of in terms of rooms and are not experienced in their own right anymore.

Style

Style

This poem is written in free verse, which is a way of saying that it does not follow any regular pattern of rhythm or rhyme. The lines do not follow any standard length either. This can be seen with a cursory glance at the poem, which sometimes has a long line followed by a short line, sometimes a short line followed by a long one, and sometimes pairs of lines of nearly equal length. Although the stanzas are two lines each, it cannot properly be said that this poem is written in couplets, because that term is usually used for lines that are similar in rhythm and length and that rhyme with each other.

The voice of the poem is usually omniscient, which means that it can give information from anywhere at any time. It is cold and logical, such as when it explains that "many have forgotten" or observes that "there are more every year who remember." At the end of the poem, the voice uses the first person plural form of address, including itself with those being described, referring to humanity collectively as "we."

Merwin often uses the poetic technique known as the synecdoche to make his ideas more forceful. Synecdoche is the use of one particular member of a group or one particular part of a thing to represent the whole. For instance, when he refers to "a heart beating," it is clear that he means a whole person, but by focusing on this one specific part he is able to use the emotional associations that come with a beating heart without wasting extra words to mention the person attached. He does a similar thing by referring to "the first hands and first voices" in line 17. Here, the synecdoche not only implies the whole persons, without taking the trouble to state the obvious, but it also gives an infant's eye view of the world, specifying the things that a child in a crib would notice. In a sense, "rooms," the main image of the poem, is a synecdoche because it is just one symptom of humanity's narrowed and sheltered existence that is used to represent an entire problem.

Tone

Merwin achieves an ironic tone in this poem, not by making any claims that are too outlandish, but by the use of repetition. In nine of the stanzas□ just over half of them□the words "room" or "rooms" are at the end of the first line. In addition, they end the second line in four stanzas. The hollow sound of this word, which is repeated so often, gives the poem a hollow, haunting sound. The fact that the poem uses this word so often creates a somewhat mocking tone, as if the speaker of the poem does not believe that rooms are as important as they are generally believed to be. For example, the lines "because of a room a heart was born / in a room" could easily have been handled grammatically without the second use of the word "room," but using it twice overemphasizes it, making readers resistant to the concept of rooms.

Near the end of the poem, in the three stanzas that lead to the final one, a repetitious pattern occurs to take the speaker's exhaustive use of the word "room" to an extreme. Stanzas 14, 15, and 16 start with lines that parallel each other in structure and in sound: "[A]nd the products of rooms," "we meet in a room," and "once there is a room" all come in such close succession that it is difficult to avoid the tone that they set. They are plain statements, and, clustered together like this, monotonous ones, and in that way their tone fits the lackluster quality that the poem is attributing to rooms themselves.

Historical Context

Throughout history, there have always been people who were forced to live out of doors, with no permanent address and no means to afford any type of "room." In the 1980s, though, the issue of homelessness became a significant social issue. The country's homeless population soared during that time. It is difficult to know just how many people were homeless at this time, because, by definition, homeless people have no addresses where they can be contacted and therefore counted. Some sources estimated that two or three million Americans were without housing at the height of the problem, although more recent calculations say that the number was closer to 600-700,000. The wide variance in numbers is due to the fact that different organizations have used different methods to determine the number of homeless people. Counting the homeless has always been done by mathematical formulae that try to expand on what little information is available, with varying degrees of accuracy.

Several factors are seen to have caused the homeless crisis of the 1980s. One of the most direct causes was the recession at the end of the 1970s, which resulted in the highest rate of poverty in two decades. By 1982, unemployment in America was at 10.8 percent, its highest rate since the Great Depression. The recession reached across the globe, where some countries suffered triple-digit inflation. This made it cheap for American manufacturers to move their production facilities to Third World countries, taking away hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs that had provided the promise of secure, lifetime employment to earlier generations. The semi-skilled took jobs from the unskilled, pushing them deeper into poverty just as prices were rising.

At the same time, the cost of housing was rising faster than other necessary budget items, especially for those at the lowest economic levels. A shift in population movement had affluent Americans moving into cities, reversing a trend that had existed since the end of World War II of cities losing population to suburbs. Developers bought inexpensive apartment buildings and tore them down and rebuilt on the land or else renovated them to high-priced condominiums, driving away tenants who could afford rent but had no down payment for a mortgage. To attract higher-class residents, cities bulldozed the Single Room Occupancy hotels (SROs), which had provided inexpensive, subsidized shelter. Falling crop prices created intense economic difficulties in rural areas, and many farmers, unable to meet mortgage payments, underwent bank foreclosure and were left with no livelihood and no place to live.

One significant segment of the homeless population was those who suffered from mental health disorders that kept them from work. During the 1960s and 1970s, new theories of patients' rights led to tougher standards against holding people against their will. Those who were deemed not dangerous to themselves were deinstitutionalized and sent out into the world to fend for themselves. Many were unable to cope, even with economic assistance, and ended up living on the streets.

In earlier times of economic difficulty during the twentieth century, the U. S. government had enacted policies to help the underprivileged. During the depression of the 1930s,

President Franklin D. Roosevelt backed the New Deal, an assemblage of economic bills that, among other things, provided government loans to farmers and homeowners and created government jobs to keep people working. During the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson pressed for a program called the Great Society, with the stated goal of eliminating poverty in America. When Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, though, it was with a campaign based on reducing the size of the federal government, not expanding it. That year, Reagan signed the deepest tax cut in American history, following an economic theory that held that the economy would prosper with less government involvement and that this prosperous society would willingly take care of the needy within it. His theory was called "trickle-down economics" because it counted on prosperity to eventually reach those at the bottom of the economic ladder. Before that could happen, though, there had to be painful cuts in government services that some saw as aggravating the homeless problem. Government programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children and the Department of Housing and Urban Development saw their budgets slashed by more than half, just as the problem of homelessness was growing. It did not help that Reagan was reluctant to discuss homelessness or that when he did, he characterized it as a lifestyle decision that had been made by the homeless people.

As the problem grew, it became one of the political issues that defined the decade. Political activists organized massive protests and activities to draw the public's attention to the problem and to the government's lack of response to it. In many urban areas, people donated their time and money to building and maintaining shelters. One of the most famous advocates of the rights of the homeless was Mitch Snyder, a former advertising executive who drew national attention to the problem with a 1994 hunger strike and who led 250,000 people in a march for affordable housing in Washington in 1989. In 1986, six million people participated in Hands Across America, a televised event that aimed to form a chain of people holding hands that would stretch from coast to coast to bring public attention to homelessness. These high-profile efforts brought little governmental assistance. Perhaps the greatest success was the 1987 Homeless Assistance Act, intended to provide job training, emergency shelter funds, and the Interagency Council on the Homeless to coordinate federal efforts; of one billion dollars budgeted for the act, Congress only provided $600 million. America's economic prosperity since the early 1990s has given the government revenues to address the homeless problem, making it less conspicuous, but at the time that Merwin wrote this poem, the question of who could afford the privilege of living indoors was still a compelling social issue.

Critical Overview

Merwin's poetry has been almost universally praised by critics since the start of his career, with the publication of his first book in 1952, *A Mask for Janus*. Then, he was recognized as a master of the traditional forms, showing the influence of the poet Robert Graves (whom he worked for, tutoring Graves's children) and of the medieval poetry that he was translating for a living. It has always been considered one of Merwin's graces not to stay confined to any particular style, however. As Edward J. Brunner put it in 1991, he "appears to have no style at all, or to take on whatever style suites the moment." For Brunner, this "transparency" is what makes Merwin's poetry effective, although he does think that changing so often made the poet "underestimated by reviewers: they have perennially lagged one book behind him, expecting the latest volume to continue the tendencies of the one before."

Although Merwin's growth may have baffled reviewers, it has generally been met with critical approval. In the 1960s, he made his most dramatic change, expanding beyond formal poetry and striking out with the free verse style that he has used ever since. Critics kept pace with his stylistic changes, and reviews still stayed on his side, even as his writing took on a more personal form than they had known. Merwin won the Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for *The Carrier of Ladders*.

It would be a mistake, however, to call the freedom he has exercised in his poetry of the last several decades a signature style, for within the wide open terrain of free verse Merwin has exhibited many different styles, using a new one for each new volume of poetry he has produced. When *The Rain In the Trees* was published, critics accepted the fact that he was a poet always reinventing himself and that most of his new styles were successful. He was not as directly influential with that book as he had been in 1967, when his book *The Lice* spurred a wave of younger poets to directly imitate his style, but instead his influence was felt on the range of styles practiced by a newer generation of poets. As Mark Jarman said in the *Hudson Review*:

[T]he current factions of poetry are reflected in the range of his accomplishments. For the new formalist, the neo-narrative poet, the language poet, the writer of free verse lyric, for each of these there is a Merwin and it would be good to come to terms with him.

Now, at age 73, Merwin's reputation is beyond reproach. In a recent overview of the poet's life in the *Los Angeles Times*, Tony Perry captured the esteem fellow poets hold for Merwin this way: "In fact, he's important enough that there is a joke in literary circles that if Merwin has not won a particular prize, it obviously is not worth winning." His poems are still frequently published, especially in the *Atlantic Monthly*, which has had a longstanding relationship with him for the past twentyfive years, and the *New Yorker*, one of the most respected publications in the country to print the works of poets.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an adjunct professor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College and an associate professor of literature and creative writing at College of Lake County and has written extensively for academic publishers. In this essay, Kelly examines how the concept of an echo is more than just a symbol in Merwin's poem, affecting readers' entire perception of the poem's message.

Science is the pursuit of rational explanations, but sometimes scientific rationality does not come close enough to human experience to ring true. A good example of this is the case of echoes. Echoes can be scientifically measured and explained, but even the most complete theory does little to ease the strange feeling of hearing something once and then hearing it again, seconds later, from a different direction. A poet writing about echoes does not have to deal with what causes them but with that they feel like and with the other places in life where that feeling turns up.

W. S. Merwin's poem "The Horizons of Rooms" is not a poem about echoes, but it uses the idea of them to make its point clear. The poem's main focus is, of course, rooms, specifically how rooms keep humanity separated from nature. To study this point seriously means showing how rooms echo the natural world. "The Horizons of Rooms" tells its readers that people can see their existence only in terms of rooms and that they yearn for the natural world, but the relationship between these two is left unexplained. The relationship occurs, like a natural phenomenon, for readers to encounter and reach their own conclusions. The poem itself, though, is not a thing of nature. It is seeded with hints, like its emphasis on echoes, which help readers understand its position.

For the most part, Merwin avoids using specific poetic techniques. The point of "The Horizons of Rooms" is to look at nature, to examine the problem of humanity forcing its will on natural patterns. For the poet to impose a strict pattern on his words would be a direct violation of what the words are trying to express. The closest thing to formal style is the fact that all of the poem's stanzas have the same number of lines, two each. Superficially, they bear a slight resemblance to couplets, an ancient technique derived from the oral tradition that preceded written poetry. Couplets, however, have more to bind the two sequential lines together than mere proximity. The traditional couplet has two lines of the same length, with the same number of syllables following the same rhythm pattern (for example, "Whose woods are these? I think I know / His house is in the village, though"). Most often, the two lines end with rhyming words, which is in itself a device of echoing one sound with another. If "The Horizons of Rooms" is trying to make a subtle point about echoes resonating throughout human history, rhyming every two lines would probably overemphasize that point to death.

There cannot be a strict formal structure, not if the poem intends to explore truths beyond conventional thought, cutting through the misconceptions that human minds have developed and accepted as reality. Strict adherence to form would be just as confining as limiting life itself to rooms. Letting each stanza find its own rhythm mirrors the poem's spirit of intellectual freedom, whereas maintaining the consistency of two-

line stanzas at least gives readers some feel for the balance and harmony found in nature.

The poem has no structural elements other than the consistency of two lines per stanza. It would be over-ambitious for a critic to make too much of this, to say that the pairings of these lines is meant to represent a duality of nature, such as sound and echo. Poets usually fail when they use elements of poetry as if they are sending coded messages. It is not, however, too exaggerated to look at how these pairs of lines neatly hold pairs of ideas together: In this case, the "two-ness" of the lines is not the message; it just happens to give a visual effect to the poem's balance of images. Each stanza sets the poem's main idea, that of "rooms," against one other idea of equal force that helps compliment or contrast it, so that, as each stanza passes, readers get a clearer sense of the meaning of rooms within this poem.

Together, the words "room" and "rooms" appear twenty-one times within the thirty-four lines of the poem, showing up at least once in each stanza and twice in two of them. One frantic stanza near the end uses "room" three times, a quarter of its total word count. The use of short two-line stanzas allows this word to be counterbalanced with other ideas that are of equal importance in the short term. For example, in the first stanza, the word "rain" is the only other significant noun. In the second, it is "snow"; in the third, "sky." Subsequent stanzas pair "room" with ideas that would not be as noticeable in a poem rich in description or in one with a heavy poetic style to distract its readers' attention. Other pairings include "room / tree," "mountain / room," "room / wall of ice," and "room / ceiling." The pattern that emerges is that there are other things that are as important as the concept of rooms, but, as the poem's second line explains, people have been trained to see these other things only as they relate to rooms. The overall movement of the poem is to move these paired words away from the familiar, so that the final stanzas introduce "the final uplands," "something," and "good fortune," abstract concepts that remind readers of how little they know.

The effect of balancing images like the sky and mountains against a hollow, vague, open concept like "room" is close to the effect that an echo has when it takes a real-life sound and copies it with a haunting imitation. The echo is, in fact, the most important image in this poem. One clue of this comes from simple arithmetic: In a poem that makes such infrequent reference to tangible objects, the echoing wall of ice shows up twice. It is a powerful image, rich with associations and imagination. When it is first mentioned, the wall of ice echoes a heartbeat, small and gentle, that would barely be audible under usual circumstance but is raised to a significant echo through poetic exaggeration. This is the time when the echoing wall is in a cave that has given an early human sanctity, signifying the origin of the "room" concept. The second time the echo is mentioned, it appears in a modern context, actually echoing its earlier appearance in the poem. Here, in the twelfth stanza, the poem gives emphasis to the wall of ice by splitting its description at the line break, leaving "of ice" to stand adrift on its own, conspicuously. Doing so highlights the difference between nature's cold, hard immobility and the "hands and voices" that create the sounds that echo off it. Somewhere between these two, the solid and the mobile, the echoer and the echoed, lies the secret to the ancient mystery of rooms.

The constant repetition of the hollow "oo" sound in "room" brings up the feeling of an echo. The powerful and complex image presented by the noises of life bouncing off walls of ice certainly raises the idea of an echo. In addition to these is Merwin's free-form play with the concept of time, which he has bouncing around like sound waves off the walls, from ancient to modern, from earlier to right now. Time is a concept that is always tied to echoes, since the present is always an echo of the past.

The linear sense of time that readers take for granted is fractured, bent, and examined from dif- ferent angles, with the net effect of making readers start all over with their expectations. Starting in the first stanza, the poem twists the idea of time around from ordinary expectations. Under normal circumstances, the idea of the room would be considered an ancient one, a standard of civilization that has been with humanity throughout history and is therefore, unquestionably, quite old. This poem takes an even wider look at history, however, reminding readers of the fact that humans and their history are actually quite new, measured in tens of thousands of years as opposed to about twenty billion years or so since the big bang.

Other instances of time in this poem serve to continually rearrange readers' expectations. They range from the localized situations that could take place within a contemporary lifetime, such as sitting up late or meeting other people, to the prehistoric scene of the first person to inhabit a room and the isolation that resulted. Because the poem's sense of time is dealt with unevenly, with past and present woven together without a straight chronological ordering, it is able to examine what humanity is and, simultaneously, how it came to be that way. The present may be an echo of the past, but, according to the way the poem has used the word "echo" and presented the idea of it, the meaning of this relationship is much more complex than just noting that one thing follows the other.

There are two significant cases that present this poem's sense of time. One has to do with the image of the echoing well of ice, and it takes place across stanzas 10 through 12. Stanza 10 begins a line of thought that does not follow logically from the one that came before it, breaking away from the previous idea with the word "but," a weak way to obscure the change in direction. This stanza tells of a situation from the childhood of a typical person, experiencing the world from a crib or bassinet, looking up at hands, voices, and a ceiling; stanza 11 tells of a situation later in life; stanza 12 takes the same life and ties it to the primitive life from centuries past by calling the wall of the contemporary room a "wall of ice." The forward progress of one person's story is quickly transferred to the story of the species, bound together by the presence of the echo.

The other significant trick of time in this poem is verbal. In line 18, discussing people who think of a room when they think of childhood, Merwin explains the room that comes to mind is one "in which the person they were is thinking of a forest." There is seldom a case in which "were" and "is" belong together, and it takes a skillful poet to construct a phrase in which they can exist comfortably side by side. The conflict of putting past and present together like this, almost making them one, is what the poem is all about. It is also the basic principle of the echo, when what happened a few moments ago is happening now.

The one place where "The Horizons of Rooms" does not imply an echo is its title. No echo comes from the horizon, which is too flat and distant to bounce sound back. This is the poem's deepest contradiction: The horizon is everything that a room is not, and vice versa. This may be Merwin's ultimate point, that rooms lack the freedom that a true horizon holds forth. It isn't just a freedom from walls that rooms prohibit, but freedom from the echoes of the near and distant past.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "The Horizons of Rooms," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #2

Perkins teaches American and British literature and film. In this essay, Perkins explores the poem's statement on the modern separation between nature and humanity. I

n his article on W. S. Merwin for the *Yale Review*, Laurence Lieberman writes that Merwin's poetry often "pronounces a judgment against modern men," in that they have "betrayed [that which] had power to save us." One such redemptive force that Merwin identifies in his poetry is nature, which, Lieberman notes, the poet insists can save us from "a moral vacuity that is absolute and irrevocable." In many of his poems, Merwin condemns the modern impulse to ignore and separate ourselves from nature. In "Horizons of Rooms," he illustrates this theme in an exploration of our alienation from the natural world and the sense of nothingness that results.

In his review of Merwin's *The Rain in the Trees*, Mark Jarman determines that the "presiding metaphor" of the poems in that volume "is that of a lost language." In "Horizons of Rooms," a sense of language lost is evident throughout the poem in its spare verse, devoid of interior and exterior details. This sparsity suggests that the consequence of one's alienation from nature is a universe stripped of color and meaning.

The poem reinforces its sense of alienation as it engrosses one in the thresholds between past and present. Merwin moves readers back and forth through time, from a period when humans enjoyed a communion with nature to the modern age, when people have placed themselves in rooms that sep- arate them from the natural world, a world that people have now come to ignore. The title suggests that the spaces in which people presently exist have become their entire world; the boundaries of these rooms combine into an artificial horizon that people cannot see beyond.

The speaker notes that even though "there have been rooms for such a short time," people are no longer aware of what exists in the physical world outside the room, "unless it is raining or snowing." Nature no longer has any relevance to people, unless it interferes with their daily lives, and so they dismiss it. Yet, modern spaces do not provide for people the sense of connection and comfort they experience in nature. Modern spaces instead reinforce a sense of spiritual void. The poem begins its articulation of this type of meaninglessness in its descriptions of each of individuals inhabiting modern rooms that are "dark," the only adjective Merwin uses in the poem to describe these man-made spaces.

In the beginning of time, there were no rooms, only a sky that "many have forgotten." As humans developed, they created natural rooms consisting "of stone and ice and a fallen tree." The speaker defines these rooms as living spaces, where the beating of hearts was echoed off of the walls of ice. These shelters where hearts were born resulted in a dynamic unification of humans with nature, all merging into the landscape of the universe.

In the modern world, people have alienated themselves from this comforting union with a landscape that echoes the barrenness at the core of our lives. Now, "the echoing wall of ice" remains empty. Now, people have only childhood memories of a communion with nature, moments when they remember "thinking of a forest." People view the landscape "between moments of remembering a room at another time." The "first hands and voices" of the past existed in the spaces of nature; yet as people confine themselves in man-made rooms, the natural spaces become empty, with no sound to echo off the walls of ice. People catch glimpses of the mountains now only as they pass between rooms; the mountains are seen but not known or appreciated.

Modern rooms refuse to offer the same kind of shelter as did the natural spaces. The walls do not echo people's spirits, and therefore people do not have a real connection with them. The rooms remain "dark," stripped of meaning, alien. People's senses do not become engaged in these rooms that lack any distinctive features. As a result, people are left feeling incomplete.

When the speaker notes, "we meet in a room and go on from room to room," Merwin suggests that modern lives consist of meaningless movements in and out of these spaces, artificial boundaries people construct to provide themselves with a sense of order and completion. As a result, people have turned their backs on anything that exists outside those boundaries, including the natural world that presents them with a constant source of vitality and wonder. The speaker describes the natural rooms as being imbued with a creative and lifesustaining force. Nature creates its own shapes that can be adapted through the imagination of the inhabitant into a sheltering space where beating hearts are echoed off of living walls, and where people communicate with nature and with each other through their hands and voices.

Today, people's lack of perspective and imagination becomes reflected in the passivity they exhibit as they "go on living" in their dark, characterless rooms, absent of any distinguishing details. The only activity conducted in these rooms is sleeping and passing from room to room, suggesting the somnambulant state of the inhabitants as they face the meaninglessness of their artificial worlds.

In his descriptions of the sleeping inhabitants of the rooms, Merwin suggests that people's selfimposed alienation from nature results in the death of the soul. The "products" of these rooms, those individuals who are surrounded and cut off by the blankness that characterizes these artificial spaces, are carried to their "final uplands" near the end of the poem. Yet, even with the threat of this spiritual death, people continue to "go on from room to room," acknowledging that "there was something before," but unable to articulate what that something was. People's focus is solely on what the room has "become by good fortune," for these modern rooms are the only spaces that they now value.

Ironically, this anticlimactic ending refuses to focus on the death of the soul, represented by the individuals carried to the final uplands. It instead ends with the false note of accomplishment, that the goal of attaining the perfect space has been achieved. Thus the break with the natural world has been made complete. The individuals left in the

rooms refuse to acknowledge the blankness of their experience in their artificial spaces and the subsequent spiritual void that results.

Edwin Folsom in his article for *Shenandoah* notes that Merwin's poetry shares a similar subject to that of the poetry of Walt Whitman in its exploration of American values. Merwin's themes, however, as well as his distinctive poetic style, contradicts Whitman's nineteenth-century romanticism. Folsom writes that Merwin's poetry "often implicitly and sometimes explicitly responds to Whitman; his twentieth century sparsity and soberness . . . answer, temper, Whitman's nineteenth century expansiveness and exuberance—his enthusiasm over the American creation."

Merwin's poetic technique in "Horizons of Rooms" helps to illustrate and reinforce his thematic focus. The discordant rhythms of his free verse lines reflect the destructive separation of the self from the natural world. Each stanza consists of two lines, but they do not become traditional couplets, refusing to maintain a consistent meter or rime.

The sense of abrupt separation is reinforced by the seemingly arbitrary line breaks. Lines end not at the end of a thought, but in the middle of one, suggesting a sense of disorder. The breaks, however, have been planned carefully to highlight the poem's subject. Ten lines end with the word "room." The sense of disorder that emerges from the broken thoughts coupled with the focus on the rooms reinforces Merwin's commentary on the destructiveness of these unnatural spaces. The poem's lack of punctuation illustrates the title's dominant image: the series of empty images represented by the succession of rooms merge to become an endless horizon of artificial spaces that prevent from experiencing the natural world beyond its borders.

The imagery of the poem displays an elemental surrealism that suggests the artificiality of the modern constructed spaces and the individual's subconscious response to them. The rooms themselves, as well as the movement in and out of them, express an unconscious realm of experience, reinforced by the lack of descriptive details. The only room the inhabitants appear to express a conscious appreciation of it is nature's "room," where beating hearts echo off of walls, and hands and voices emerge. When the speaker shifts the focus to modern rooms, the inhabitants appear in a dream-like state, moving from room to room without purpose and without noting any differentiating qualities. The only activity that occurs in these rooms is sleeping, again reinforcing the unconscious nature of the experience within them. These surrealist elements reinforce the sense of nothingness experienced by the characters in the modern world, who have constructed spaces that isolate them from nature.

Edward J. Brunner, in his book on Merwin, notes that humans strive to shape their world through the construction of "stable orders," but Merwin's poetry insists that the natural world "will endure and persist while what we shape over and against it is subject to loss and decay." In "Horizons of Rooms," Merwin expresses his disdain for people's ignorance of and subsequent separation from nature and acknowledges the destructive sense of alienation that results.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "The Horizons of Rooms," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

A 1991 videocassette of Merwin reading from the book this poem came from, entitled *W. S. Merwin: The Rain in the Trees*, is available from Atlas Video. It is part of the series *A Moveable Feast: Profiles of Contemporary Authors*.

Merwin reads from his *Selected Poems* and *The Rain in the Trees* on a videocassette from the Lannan Foundation, taped in Los Angeles on May 16, 1988, and released in 1989.

Films for the Humanities and Sciences has released a 1997 videocassette of Merwin talking about his life and poetry and reading from his works, under the title *Witness the Ecological Poetry of W. S. Merwin*.

Roland Flint interviewed Merwin on October 10, 1994, just after he won the prestigious Tanning Prize. That interview, along with Merwin reading some poems from *The Rain in the Trees*, is on a videocassette titled *The Writing Life*, released by The Society, of Columbia, Maryland, in 1994.

Merwin reads his poetry on a 1991 audiocassette from In Our Times Arts Media entitled *Selected Poems* and *The Rain in the Trees*.

Topics for Further Study

Research what anthropologists have been able to determine about humanity's earliest housing. In particular, show the differences between the first free-standing structures made by human beings and the earliest "rooms," the caves in which people lived.

This poem suggests that people have memories of what life was like before the human species started living indoors. Read about psychologist C. G. Jung's theory of the "collective unconscious," which assumes that some of mankind's earliest experiences are still carried in the memories of all people. Show how Jung would agree and disagree with Merwin.

With a pencil, pen, or computer program, design a room you would like to have in your house that you think W. S. Merwin would approve of. Use examples from this poem to show why your design would be acceptable.

This poem mentions the idea of sounds echoing off ice several times. Research the acoustic properties of ice and report on how sounds bouncing off it would be different from those bouncing off stone, snow, or wood.

Talk to an architect or a carpenter about how personal computers have changed the design of rooms in American homes being built in the last ten years. Try to imagine how other major innovations, such as electric lighting, changed the shapes of homes in the past.

Some people think that babies born at home have an advantage over those born in a hospital, whereas others think that it does not matter because the baby is too young to register her or his surrounding. Read an article from each perspective. Refer to both articles in explaining whether or not you think that the room that one is born in matters.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: The price of housing is on the rise. Investment firms find real estate a lucrative place to make money, as Americans spend proportionally more for shelter than for any of their other requirements.

Today: New construction is stable, thanks to low interest rates, and the profits to be made are comparable to other investments.

1980s: Third World nations, like the "final uplands" mentioned in the poem, weaken their shaky economies by importing more than their gross domestic products can pay for. More than twenty countries are forced to default on international loans.

Today: The world economy is on the decline but is still enjoying a record-setting long period of prosperity.

1980s: In a development related to the rise of holistic medicine in the 1970s, more Americans started having their babies at home, with the aid of midwives.

Today: Holistic medicine and herbal supplements have become accepted mainstream products, but Americans still have little faith in midwives' ability to handle birth complications, and women overwhelmingly have their babies in hospitals, or with a midwife and a doctor's supervision.

1980s: The term "global warming" first comes into common usage when NASA scientists report to Congress that the probable cause for the rising temperature is the greenhouse effect, with carbon dioxide and other gasses trapping the sun's rays within the atmosphere.

Today: Although it is still refuted by some, the danger of global warming is recognized by most credible scientific institutions.

What Do I Read Next?

To help readers become familiar with Merwin's earlier career, Copper Canyon Press published a thrift edition entitled *The First Four Books of Poems*, which contains "A Mask for Janus," "The Dancing Bears," "Green with Beasts," and "The Drunk in the Furnace." The same press has also published *The Second Four Books of Poems*, which includes "The Moving Target," "The Life," "The Carrier of Ladders," and "Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment."

One of the strongest influences on Merwin was John Berryman, with whom he studied at Princeton. Berryman's 1964 collection *77 Dream Songs*, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize, is considered one of the great books of twentieth-century poetry. It is available as *The Dream Songs*, published by Noonday Press and released in 1982.

Maurice Manning is the most recent winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award, for which Merwin is the judge. His collection of poems, *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions*, was published by Yale University Press in 2001.

Even readers who are not familiar with the *Purgatorio* of fourteenth-century poet Dante Alighieri will be able to identify some of Merwin's verbal touches in his 2000 translation from the Italian, available from Knopf. It is the most recent of the great works of literature that Merwin has translated, and one of his most acclaimed.

Another poet who dealt with humanity's complex relationship with nature was Theodore Roethke, who was from the generation before Merwin's. Roethke's best work is now available in *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, published by Anchor Press in 1975.

Gary Snyder is a poet who is often associated with Merwin□they are from the same generation and studied under the same Zen master. Students who appreciate Merwin's poetry often appreciate Snyder's. His poetry is collected in *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*, published by Pantheon Books in 1993.

Further Study

Clifton, Michael, "Breaking the Glass: A Pattern of Visionary Imagery in W. S. Merwin," in *Chicago Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Summer 1998, pp. 65-82.

Published a year after this poem, Clifton's theory of poetry does not take "The Horizons of Rooms" into account, but it does give interesting background to Merwin's writing style.

Connaroe, Joel, *Eight American Poets*, University of South Carolina Press, 1997.

This book, a follow-up to Connaroe's successful *Six American Poets*, presents the works of Merwin and other poets of his generation who are considered his equals: Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg, James Merrill, and Anne Sexton.

Hix, H. L., *Understanding W. S. Merwin*, University of South Carolina Press, 1997.

This book, part of the *Understanding Contemporary American Literature* series, gives an overview of the changes of Merwin's career, spanning over forty years.

Scigaj, Leonard, *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets*, University Press of Kentucky, 1999.

This book examines the works of Merwin, Wendell Berry, A. R. Ammons, and Gary Snyder and the relationship between poetry and the environment. It contains some difficult philosophy that students might find a little challenging.

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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.

BOOKRAGS

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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