His Speed and Strength Study Guide

His Speed and Strength by Alicia Ostriker

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.

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".

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".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

His Speed and Strength Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Poem Text....5

Plot Summary....6

Themes....10

Style....12

Historical Context....13

Critical Overview....15

Criticism....16

Critical Essay #1....17

Critical Essay #2....20

Critical Essay #3....24

Critical Essay #4....29

Topics for Further Study....32

Compare and Contrast....33

What Do I Read Next?....34

Further Study....35

Bibliography....37

Copyright Information....38

Introduction

"His Speed and Strength," published in Alicia Ostriker's 1980 collection *The Mother/Child Papers*, is a mother's meditation on both her son's maturation and the human race's survival. The poem's setting, its references to popular culture, and its conversational diction all belong to contemporary America. The speaker's allusions to mythical goddesses and poet Walt Whitman, however, signal the timeless relevance of the mother's thoughts. In her book of essays, *Writing Like a Woman*, Ostriker says of the period in which she wrote this poem: "It was impossible [in the 1970s] to avoid meditating on the meaning of having a boy child in time of war, or to avoid knowing that 'time of war' means all of human history." In the poem, the mother watches her son display "speed and strength" on his bicycle and at the town pool. She fancies herself a modern version of the ancient goddesses Niké and Juno as she competes with and protects her son. Through a series of ordinary images, the mother observes the masculine and feminine traits that compose her son's emerging adult identity. The poem implies that our culture opposes these traits at its own peril. On the one hand, the mother is proud of her son's developing speed, strength, and competitiveness□all traditionally masculine traits. But, since these traits also suit boys to become war fodder, the mother hopes to nurture in her son a (traditionally feminine) sense of connection to other people and things. If he maintains this connection, his strength may serve constructive, not destructive, ends. The son shows concern for his mother and a sense of connection to other boys as he goes off to play. Seeing both masculine and feminine traits in her son and imagining herself as both a goddess of military victory and a goddess of motherhood, the speaker implies that her son will also successfully connect and integrate diverse traits.

Author Biography

Ostriker was born in Brooklyn, New York, on November 11, 1937, to David Suskin and Beatrice Linnick Suskin. Her father was employed by the New York City Department of Parks. Ostriker's mother wrote poetry and read Shakespeare and Browning to her daughter, who soon began writing her own poetry as well as showing an interest in drawing. Initially, Ostriker had hoped to be an artist, and she studied art as a teenager and young adult. Two of her books, *Songs* (1969) and *A Dream of Springtime* (1979), feature her own graphics on the covers.

Ostriker received her bachelor's degree in English from Brandeis University in 1959 and her master's and doctorate from the University of Wisconsin. Her dissertation became her first critical book, *Vision and Verse in William Blake* (1965); later, she edited and annotated Blake's complete poems for Penguin Press. In 1965, Ostriker began teaching at Rutgers University.

Poem Text

His speed and strength, which is the strength of ten
years, races me home from the pool.
First I am ahead, Niké, on my bicycle,
no hands, and the *Times* crossword tucked in my rack,
then he is ahead, the Green Hornet,
buzzing up Witherspoon,
flashing around the corner to Nassau Street.

At noon sharp he demonstrated his neat
one-and-a-half flips off the board:
Oh, brave. Did you see me, he wanted to know.
And I doing my backstroke laps was Juno
Oceanus, then for a while I watched some black
and white boys wrestling and joking, teammates, wet
plums and peaches touching each other as if

it is not necessary to make hate,
as if Whitman was right and there is no death.
A big wind at our backs, it is lovely, the maple boughs
ride up and down like ships. Do you mind
if I take off, he says. I'll catch you later,
see you, I shout and wave, as he peels
away, pedaling hard, rocket and pilot.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

In these lines, the speaker introduces a boy's physical speed and strength, repeating the word "strength" twice for emphasis. The poet reinforces the sense of speed by using alliteration, beginning nearby words with the same "s" sound. The traits of speed and strength signal other masculine traits about which the speaker is both proud and concerned. With the first line, Ostriker invokes the expression "the strength of ten men," but she uses enjambment, wrapping the sentence onto the next line, to create two meanings at once. First, the poet causes readers to complete the phrase "the strength of ten" in their heads with "men." She thereby introduces themes of manhood and great strength without stating them directly. Next, by beginning the second line with "years," the poet deflates the heroic phrase and reveals that "he" is only a boy of ten. Though the word "years" holds comic surprise here, the poet causes readers to keep both ideas in their heads: the boy is only ten, but he will grow into a strong man one day just around the corner. Poets often use enjambment to create two meanings from one sentence or phrase.

Lines 3-4

These lines set a tone of playfulness and companionship between the speaker and the boy. That the mother is first ahead of and then outdistanced by the boy shows that she fosters his sense of competition and that he will soon grow faster and stronger than she. For the moment, however, they are equal. In line 3, the speaker characterizes herself as the Greek goddess Niké, who represented winged victory, or speed, and whose image commemorated military victories in particular. This allusion, together with the themes of manhood, begins the poem's subtle meditation on masculinity and war. The speaker's mention of the "*Times* crossword" suggests both that this is a leisurely day and that the mother enjoys intellectual as well as physical challenges.

Lines 5-7

The rest of the first stanza shows the boy's competitive energy as he races out of sight. Comparing the boy to "the Green Hornet," a popular radio adventure series of the 1930s and 1940s, the speaker again highlights and gently deflates the boy's super-manly aspirations. Like Superman, the Green Hornet was a newspaperman by day and a masked crime-fighter by night. Playing on the name "Hornet," the speaker watches the boy "buzz" and "flash" away like an insect. This also identifies the speaker as a member of an earlier generation who heard, or has heard of, that radio show. The names

"Witherspoon" and "Nassau Street" locate the poem in Princeton, New Jersey, where those main streets meet.

Lines 8-9

In stanza 2, the setting shifts to the town pool. The speaker's mention of "noon sharp" may have several implications. Noon is poised between morning and afternoon, as the boy is poised between childhood and adulthood. The sun at that hour approaches its peak strength, as the boy approaches his. This moment is recorded exactly in time with the precision of a mother, recalling events in her own and her child's shared lives. The boy's precise flip again reminds the reader of his maturing physical agility.

Line 10

This line identifies the speaker as a mother and the boy as her son. The slightly sarcastic cheer, "Oh, brave," indicates a mother's blend of pride and teasing toward her children. The boy's need for his mother to see, approve, and acclaim his feat is characteristic of child. Note that his "demand," "Did you see me," has no question mark, though, because it is not really a question. This mother does not seem to respond, and the boy does not seem to need her to. The words and punctuation in line 10, then, reinforce the theme of a boy poised on the verge of manhood: the boy is still a child who needs and wants his mother's approval, but he is almost beyond this stage.

Line 11

Here, the speaker imagines herself as the Roman goddess Juno. Juno was the wife of Jupiter, queen of the gods, and the goddess of married women and childbirth. (In Greek legend, Juno is named Hera and her husband is known as Zeus.) In myth, Juno is fiercely jealous of her unfaithful husband Jupiter and uses her powers primarily to punish the women with whom he cavorts. Thus, most references to Juno imply a jealous, wrathful, implacable woman. By referring to Juno luxuriously doing the backstroke, the speaker reinterprets and revises the traditional myth of this goddess. The mother in this poem shows none of those negative traits, so a relaxed, accepting, loving Juno emerges in these lines.

Line 12

The poet may separate the name "Juno Oceanus" on two lines because of rhythm and/or meaning. Line 11 has eleven syllables already; adding the four syllables of "Oceanus" would disturb this stanza's rhythm of mostly ten and eleven syllable lines. The poet also may have enjambed "Oceanus," writing the name on the next line, to create a dual meaning. Oceanus was a mythical male figure who fathered thousands of sea nymphs and river gods. He was a powerful but kindly old titan who ruled the oceans before Jupiter and his brothers took over the heavens and earth. By conceiving of "Juno

Oceanus," the speaker envisions a new, dualistic, mythic figure who is both female and male, mother and father, and a ruler of the heavens and the seas. By splitting the name over two lines, the poet underscores this dual nature. This new mythic figure who encompasses male and female provides a model for the son to emulate as he combines masculine and feminine qualities in himself.

Lines 13-14

The rest of line 12 through the end of the stanza presents images of earthly oppositions synthesized into a harmonious whole. The speaker watches boys of two races, whom she compares to two types of fruit, play roughly and softly. Each difference the speaker identifies is balanced by similarities: the boys are all boys, "teammates," and all like fruit. The speaker may compare the boys to "plums and peaches" in part because these are summer fruits (and it is summer in the poem). Also, fruits are often associated with the freshness of youth, femininity and sexuality, since the story of Eve eating the apple in the Garden of Eden. By describing the boys this way, the speaker suggests that she sees how their youthful play contains opposite elements□femininity and sexuality□of which they are not yet aware. The last words of the second stanza, "as if," emphasize that the image of the boys as "teammates" is more the speaker's hopeful vision than a reality.

Line 15

The speaker ends stanza 2 with "as if" also in order to make the first line of stanza three a bold declaration of her vision of human relations. The third stanza's assurance balances the second stanza's tentative ending. Denying the need for strife between races of people, the speaker indirectly reminds the reader that this mother's contemplations take place during or shortly after the Vietnam War. The words "make hate" echo the Vietnam-era slogan: "make love, not war."

Line 16

In this line, the speaker refers to Walt Whitman, an American poet who wrote exuberant poetry in the 1800s about the connectedness of all life. Repeating "as if" to add on to her first wish, the speaker links the idea of racial and human harmony to Whitman's idea that "there is no death." Whitman's poems assert that every individual joins the earth in death and lives on in "leaves of grass," trees, and other life forms. Humans also live on, according to Whitman, by nurturing their own children and imagining future generations. When writers allude to previous writers, they often intend to invoke that writer's outlook on life rather than any specific poem or story. By alluding to a famous, visionary poet who believed that all life forms, differences, and contradictions were connected in a vibrant whole, Ostriker reminds the reader that there is a tradition of thought in this vein. Not only mothers, hoping their sons will not be killed in war, envision the world as so interconnected. Looking back from this line to line 14, the reader can see that the

phrase "touching each other" means more than the boys' literal, physical contact as they wrestle. In light of the reference to Whitman, the boys "touch each other" spiritually as well, insofar as each life is linked to the universe.

Lines 17-18

This line creates an expansive feeling. It is the longest line in the poem. Whitman's poems had enormously long lines that strove to encompass everything, and Ostriker may be echoing his style here. These lines also provide a breath of fresh air by simply describing the wind in the trees; all the other lines describe the boy or the mother's thoughts. When the speaker uses a simile to compare maple boughs to "ships," she implies that the wind is like an ocean on which the boughs "ride." Without stating this likeness between the wind and the ocean, the speaker shows how different elements (water and air) are, like people of different races or genders, indivisibly connected. The word "ships" might invoke associations with the military.

Line 19

Here, the boy again asks his mother a question without a question mark or quotation marks. The punctuation in these lines reinforces the ideas that the boy is growing up and that he is nevertheless similar and connected to his mother. "He says" rather than "he asks" in line 19 shows the boy again asserting his decision rather than asking permission. The phrase "I'll catch you later" on the same line at first appears to be spoken by the boy, but the period after he speaks and the comma after "later" and "see you" indicate that the mother speaks this phrase. By omitting quotation marks, the poet forces the reader to look closely to distinguish who is speaking. The use of slang□"take off," "catch you"□by both the son and mother also makes it hard to tell them apart. The poet writes these lines without quotation marks and in the same slang diction purposely, to suggest that the son and mother are, like many other diverse elements in this poem, intimately connected.

Lines 20-21

The final two lines connect several of the poem's metaphors. The expression, he "peels away" reminds the reader of the fruit metaphor from stanza two. Because the other boys by the pool are associated with fruit in the mother's mind, the words "peel away" suggest that the son goes off to join the other boys in their play. The son's wish to play with boys rather than his mother is a final sign that he is leaving childhood and growing up. The last words of the poem, "rocket and pilot" again invoke images of war, since rockets were created for war. The mention of a rocket also makes literal the son's metaphor for leaving: "taking off." Though the mother waves happily as he speeds away, her vision of him as both "rocket," the instrument of war, and "pilot," an agent of war, is an ominous ending to the poem.

Themes

Masculine versus Feminine

As the title implies, this poem is concerned with issues of masculinity, at least in the traditionally accepted sense. In the poem, the narrator describes a day in which she spent time with her son at the local community swimming pool. In this scene, the narrator underscores the "speed and strength" of her son in several ways. At the beginning of the poem, the mother remembers how her son raced her home from the swimming pool. The race begins in the mother's favor: "First I am ahead, Niké, on my bicycle." The reference to Niké, the Greek goddess of victory, indicates that the narrator might win this race. Yet, the son soon prevails: "then he is ahead, the Green Hornet," a reference to a popular comic book male superhero. The differences between the two styles of competing are profound. While the mother rides her bicycle with "no hands, and the *Times* crossword tucked in my rack," indicating a lack of concern for winning, the boy is described as "buzzing" up a street and "flashing around the corner."

Traditionally, masculinity is associated with strength, competitiveness, and bravery, while femininity is associated with weakness and peace. Although the identification of these traits as specifically male has been hotly debated and has been labeled a stereotypical approach by some, Ostriker sticks to the traditional associations in this poem. This continues as Ostriker describes what the actual swim at the pool was like. While the mother is leisurely "doing my backstroke laps," the boy is performing impressive "one-and-a-half flips off the board." The boy is concerned with knowing whether or not his mother saw his acrobatics.

Racial Conflict

Ostriker also discusses, at least in a subtle sense, the fact that mother and son live in a world filled with racial hatred. Ostriker describes the mother's reaction when she sees a bunch of "black / and white boys wrestling and joking, teammates." The wrestling is once again an indication of the inherent aggressive male tendencies that Ostriker is underscoring. Yet, in the context of the poem, the wrestling between African American boys and white boys also serves to highlight the fact that these two groups, in the adult world at least, are locked in a racial struggle. The poet comments on this when she notes that the boys are "touching each other as if / it is not necessary to make hate." The poet knows that, although these boys are friends here in the sheltered environment of the pool, when they grow up and enter the adult world, they may become enemies, involved in the same racial conflict that adults are.

Childhood

It is their childhood that protects the boys from this adult hate that pervades society. As the poem progresses, one might think that perhaps there is hope for this generation of

males, that maybe they can succeed peacefully where their parents' generation has not. Yet, at the end of the poem, Ostriker leaves her readers with an image that predicts the future, war-like tendencies of the boy: "he peels / away, pedaling hard, rocket and pilot." The use of these terms underscores the idea of physical war, which was a global fear when Ostriker wrote this poem, during the ideological conflict known as the Cold War. While the mother is content to focus on the "big wind at our backs" as they ride home and is not concerned with riding faster, the boy chooses to go faster, racing out of his childhood and into his adult life. One can determine, from the cues that Ostriker gives readers in the poem, that this future will likely be based on the boy's desire to achieve greater feats of speed and strength.

Style

"His Speed and Strength" is written from the first person point of view, which means that the speaker refers to herself as "I." The "I" who narrates a poem or story is often a fictional persona or character, rather than the author. In this poem, however, Ostriker seems to refer to her own son and their real hometown in New Jersey. This poem is written in free verse, which means that it does not have a regular pattern of rhymes or meter. The poem is divided into three stanzas that each have seven lines. The number of syllables and the rhythm in each line are irregular.

To determine whether a poem is written in free verse or a set form, readers can scan the meter, highlighting the syllables that are emphasized when spoken aloud. The first three lines of "His Speed and Strength" use four types of stresses: iambs, trochees, spondees, and anapests.

The first line can be read as using two iambs, one trochee, and two iambs. Or, if one stresses "is" instead of "which," then there are five iambs in a row; this is called iambic pentameter. The second line has three feet made up of a spondee and two anapests.

If you cannot find a regular pattern of stresses, rhyme, or feet in the first few lines, the poem is probably written in free verse. Though Ostriker's poem does not have a regular meter, many lines have the same number of syllables. Lines 4, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19, and 21 all have eleven syllables. The first line of each stanza has 10 syllables. Since most of the poem's lines are approximately the same length, the poem has consistency despite varying stresses. This structure parallels the poem's themes of continuity amid variation.

Historical Context

The Cold War

Ostriker wrote "His Speed and Strength" during a time when the world was anything but peaceful. Following the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan by the United States at the end of World War II in 1945, several countries quickly rushed to create their own atomic and nuclear arsenals. For the next four decades, this struggle polarized itself in an escalating conflict between the communist Soviet Union and the democratic United States. The resulting tension between these two countries□and between communism and democracy in general□ was labeled the Cold War, and for good reason. Although much of the period was technically spent in peacetime, the pervasive feeling of suspicion and paranoia that was generated by this clash of superpowers made many feel that they were fighting a war. This feeling was still strong in 1980 when Ostriker published "His Speed and Strength."

The 1980 Moscow Olympics

The Cold War hatred between communist and democratic societies affected athletes too. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, United States President Jimmy Carter instituted a boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics, which were being held in Moscow that year. The resulting boycott □which ultimately affected 5,000 athletes representing more than 80 nations□was the biggest Olympic boycott in history. As a result of the reduced number of athletes, the 1980 Olympics were not very impressive. The Soviet Union dominated the highly politicized Games, taking home 195 total medals, including 80 gold medals, but the performances by many athletes left much to be desired and were often not up to previous Olympic quality. This was due in part to the fact that those athletes who did attend the Olympics also faced a rowdy crowd and cheating by the officials.

Reagan Is Elected

Hostilities between the Soviet Union and the United States increased after the 1980 election of United States President Ronald Reagan. Formerly a Hollywood actor, Reagan's charisma and strong will had helped him win the California governor's race twice. Anybody who doubted his ability to compete with big-name politicians for the presidential bid was soon proved wrong, after a memorable debate during the Republican primaries, when the moderator attempted to shut off Reagan's microphone. Reagan's forceful reply and public display of strength helped him win over the public. He ultimately won the presidency against Democratic incumbent Carter, who tried to blast Reagan during his campaign by depicting Reagan as a warmonger. Reagan's focus on massive amounts of defense funding soon proved that he was, in fact, interested in arming the United States for potential war with the Soviet Union. With the help of tough

international allies, like British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Reagan faced off with the Soviet Union, placing America on what appeared to be the path to World War III. Besides talking tough, Reagan's image also made him seem to be powerful when it came to negotiating with hostile terrorists. After his inaugural ceremony in 1981, it was announced that Iran had agreed to release its American hostages.

Critical Overview

Although there is little criticism on "His Speed and Strength," several scholars have outlined characteristic themes and issues in Ostriker's poetry. Moreover, Ostriker has written critical books about poetry, which help illuminate her work. Critic Janet Ruth Heller in her essay, "Exploring the Depths of Relationships in Alicia Ostriker's Poetry," analyzes Ostriker's treatment of the "ambivalence" and "tensions in intimate relationships," such as those between men and women or between parents and children. These tensions and divisions are revealed in poems about miscommunication, ambivalence, suppressed anger, invisibility, silence, uncertainty, and duality, particularly within women who are both mothers and writers. In her critical book *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, Ostriker finds these and other recurring images of division in poetry by women from the 1600s to the present. In "His Speed and Strength," the mother recognizes dualistic traits in her son, but rather than causing tension within him or between mother and son, his duality gives the mother hope for his future wholeness.

Focusing perhaps on poems such as this, other reviewers argue that Ostriker's poems resolve tensions between and within people and between public and private life. In "His Speed and Strength," motherhood appears to be as, or more, powerful than the forces, such as war, that disturb the eternal process. Ostriker's poetry frequently focuses on women's lives and aspirations, myths of femininity, and relationships between men and women. When Ostriker began writing poetry in the 1960s, there were few poems about female experiences, such as pregnancy, birth, and motherhood, next to all the poems about male experiences of war, heroism, and love. The stories of female experiences that Ostriker did find in her years in college and graduate school were often rooted in ancient myths that portrayed women in negative and stereotypical ways. Like the women poets she studies, Ostriker seeks to create "revisionary myths," replacing negative myths about women with new and revised stories of women's authority and power. When the speaker in Ostriker's poem refers to herself as the goddesses Niké and Juno, she attempts to modernize and transform the negative connotations associated with these mythic female figures. Where Ostriker's criticism explores how female identity and consciousness has been represented in literature so far, her poetry envisions and creates new images of womanhood.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Ostriker's poem in relation to its historical context and events in the poet's own life.

On the surface, it appears that Ostriker's poem, "His Speed and Strength," is primarily about the differences between men and women. Ostriker draws on the traditional stereotypes of men and women, emphasizing male aggression and female passivity. There is, however, a darker side to this poem, which starts with the title itself. Although the poem does contrast men and women, or rather, a mother and son, it is really a poem about the cultural factors that determine how male "speed and strength" are used in American society, namely for military purposes. One can understand this better by examining the historical and autobiographical contexts within which Ostriker wrote the poem.

The poem was first published in 1980 in Ostriker's poetry collection, *The Mother/Child Papers*. Yet, Ostriker began writing the book much earlier. As Amy Williams notes in her entry on Ostriker in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, the book "was a ten-year project" that Ostriker began in 1970. That year, the United States was embroiled in one of its most bitter Cold War conflicts□the Vietnam War. Officially, the American participation in the war took place from 1968 to 1973. Like many other Cold War hostilities, however, the Vietnam War was rooted in events that took place much earlier. The conflict in Vietnam actually began in 1946, shortly after World War II ended. World War II left many areas in Southeast Asia unstable, and over the next two decades the United States unofficially provided military support to South Vietnam and its allies who were fighting Communist forces in North Vietnam. United States policy during this time period emphasized this type of support, as an attempt to stop the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia.

Many of the poems in Ostriker's book underscore or comment on events that took place during this very unpopular conflict. Indeed, most critics, including Williams, highlight the book's connection to the war. Williams says, "she contrasts the events of her own life with the Vietnam War." "His Speed and Strength" is more subtle in its approach, and does not link directly to any one event in the Vietnam War. Instead, it discusses war in general.

The poem contains many allusions to war or aggression, starting with mythological associations. In the first stanza, the poet discusses a mother's bike race with her son, saying "First I am ahead, Niké, on my bicycle." In Greek mythology, Niké is the goddess of victory. Although victory can apply to many situations, such as winning a competition, much of Greek mythology deals with conflict and war, so one can assume that Ostriker's use of Niké is meant to be an allusion to war.

On a similar note, later in the poem, Ostriker alludes to a Roman goddess, when she is describing the mother's day at the pool: "And I doing my backstroke laps was Juno." In

Roman mythology, Juno is the Roman goddess of light, birth, women, and marriage. She is also the wife of Jupiter, the chief Roman god, who rules over all of the other gods, enforcing his dominance when necessary. By referring to herself as Juno, the poet is underscoring, albeit in a subtle way, the mother's connection to her son and his male dominance and power. She is demonstrating her femininity by leisurely taking laps around the pool, while he is demonstrating his masculinity with his impressive "one-and-a-half flips off the board," an ultra-male symbol of competition and athletic prowess.

Still later in the poem, Ostriker references another general war theme□hate. When she is discussing the groups of boys "wrestling," another symbol of male aggression, she notes that they are also "joking," and that they are "touching each other as if / it is not necessary to make hate." On the surface, this statement seems to apply only to the racial conflicts that were evident in the United States at this point. It is not uncommon for the white boys and African American boys to be joking around, because they are, to some extent, less aware of the racial hatred that many adults experienced in America at this point. This statement, however, also underscores the war theme. War, by its very nature, generally involves hate. It is hard for a soldier to kill his enemies if he does not harbor some negative feelings toward them. For this reason, many governments, including the United States during the Vietnam War, created propaganda that was designed to breed hatred of the North Vietnamese. When Ostriker uses the phrase "make hate," she is referring to this deliberate attempt to create a negative view of another country or race during a war.

The poem also relies on some images of military equipment to underscore the war theme. In the last stanza, the poet is observing the scenery on their bike ride back from the swimming pool. She notes that they ride with "A big wind at our backs, it is lovely, the maple boughs / ride up and down like ships." In another poem, this observation could be attributed to the poet's creativity, comparing the bobbing tree branches to ships rocking gently on the waves in a large body of water. In the context of this poem, however, her use of the ships is, once again, meant to underscore a darker meaning. During the Vietnam War, the use of naval warships formed a crucial part of the United States attack strategy. As coastal countries, North and South Vietnam could be accessed by the sea, and the American government used this geographic aspect to its advantage, off-loading soldiers and weapons to the two countries.

Ostriker uses a more direct military reference in the final part of the poem, when she talks about the boy taking off during their ride home, "pedaling hard, rocket and pilot." By comparing the boy's bicycle to a rocket and the boy himself to a pilot who is navigating the rocket, the poet is directly linking the boy to the war. This is Ostriker's way of commenting on the Selective Service system that drafted thousands of young men into military service, in an attempt to feed the war machine. Even before the Vietnam War began, the United States sent an increasing number of American soldiers to Southeast Asia, posing as nonaggressive military advisors. By the time that the United States officially entered the war, it had stationed hundreds of thousands of soldiers in the area. As J. M. Roberts notes in his *Twentieth Century: The History of the World, 1901 to 2000*, "In 1968 there were over half a million American servicemen in

Vietnam." In order to meet these numbers, the United States government relied on the Selective Service system to conscript young American men into the military.

At this point, one can see that the poet is worried about the destiny of American males. Throughout the poem, Ostriker notes the male focus on strength, competition, and aggression, all factors that make a good soldier. By associating the boy in the poem directly with military weaponry such as rockets, the poet is noting that this ten-year-old boy may someday be groomed for military service.

To better understand the poet's fear for the boy, one must examine certain aspects of the poet's own life, namely, the birth of her son, Gabriel. As Judith Pierce Rosenberg notes in her 1993 profile of Ostriker in *Belles Lettres*, Ostriker started the book after the birth of her son, "a few days after the United States invaded Cambodia and four student protesters were shot by members of the National Guard at Kent State University." Ostriker is worried in general for all American males, but specifically for her son. If he grows up a stereotypical male, encouraged to be competitive and aggressive, he might be recruited to be a soldier, as the boy in the poem surely will. If, on the other hand, her son tries to protest this cultural stereotype and speak out against war itself, he could be shot, as the student protesters were. Ostriker seems to be saying that the male emphasis on speed and strength can ultimately work against them by leading to their early deaths.

During the course of writing her book, Ostriker and the rest of the American public witnessed some changes in the Selective Service system. The practice of active drafting during peacetime ended in 1973, after the Vietnam War, providing some hope for mothers like Ostriker that their sons might be safe. However, in 1980, the year that Ostriker published her poem, the United States reinstituted draft registration, giving the government the right to draft young men in the future, if necessary, for wartime purposes, validating once again the fears of mothers such as Ostriker.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "His Speed and Strength," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Hart is a published writer who focuses on literary themes. In this essay, Hart examines Ostriker's poem as a way of better understanding the effects of mid-twentieth-century social movements and the Vietnam War on the role of motherhood.

Ostriker, the author of "His Speed and Strength," has often stated that she views the writing of poetry more as a diagnostic tool than as a remedy. Although both concepts are closely connected, Ostriker makes it clear that she relies on her poetry to tell her what she is feeling rather than to cure a specific distress that she is aware of. Her poems, in other words, inform her. The words that bubble up to the surface in the form of a poem announce, or call to her attention, something that is troubling her deep within her psyche before she can fully put her finger on what it is.

Ostriker's poem "His Speed and Strength" could be such a poem. It was published in the collection *The Mother/Child Papers* in 1980, ten years after Ostriker's son was born, ten years after four students were shot at Kent State for protesting the Vietnam War, and just a little more than ten years after Martin Luther King was assassinated. In the same year that her son was born, the first Women's Equality Day was celebrated in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of women's right to vote. The decade between the birth of Ostriker's son and the publication of this poem, in other words, was saturated with events that could well have caused a sense of unease in anyone's psyche. The times were turbulent, and Ostriker, a feminist, was giving birth in the middle of it, trying to make sense of it all.

Ostriker had to come to grips with the horrendous atrocities of a highly criticized and protested international war, while on a national level, she had to face the rampant racism that had infected her society, a fact that many white people had hitherto tried to ignore. But even more particular to this poem is what women had to face on a more personal level. Women of Ostriker's generation were trying to redefine themselves and their roles, not only in society but also on a much smaller and more intimate scale, in the family.

The image of the 1950s mother still influenced many soon-to-be-married women of Ostriker's age, but that image was in the process of collapsing; and yet no other icon had successfully been adopted. Few young 1970s feminists had any clues as to how women were, on one hand, supposed to demand equal rights in a traditionally patriarchal society and, on the other, to raise a family. At times, these two concepts seemed diametrically opposed. The emerging feminist fought for her right for advanced degrees, for better wages in the workforce, as well as for the controversial right to abortion. The feminist sentiment in those early days was often interpreted to mean that women should not marry at an early age as their 1940s and 1950s mothers had but rather that they should gain access to the business world that had previously been dominated by their male counterparts. The consequence of this belief often meant that women delayed childbirth, if they had children at all. This left other women, those who had decided to marry and to have children early in their lives, with a sense of guilt, as if

they had betrayed their own feminist beliefs. Hidden somewhere in their psyches was the idea that having children was somehow detrimental to women's progress. The role of motherhood tended to define the unliberated women of the previous generations.

So while many women of Ostriker's generation were beginning to celebrate the delay of childbearing, believing that having children was one of the reasons women were being held back, Ostriker gave birth to a son. In doing so, she appeared to be going against the tide of feminism, so through her poem, she tries to analyze how she feels about motherhood. Does motherhood entrap her? Does it deny her freedom? Has she turned her back on feminism by giving birth? It is possible that these were the questions that were surfacing in her mind as Ostriker wrote this poem.

From the very first line of the poem, rather than bemoaning motherhood, Ostriker celebrates it through the figure of her son. She begins by honoring him. She admires his ten-year-old speed and strength, which, by the way, she emphasizes by using this same phrase as the title of her poem, making it the focus of the entire piece. She honors his power not just because he is blessed with it but also because his strength challenges her in a lot of different ways. The challenge that his youthful energy offers is not a typical one in which either the son or the mother will be singularly victorious, but rather one in which they both will benefit. Ostriker makes this clear by having the narrator of the poem not only admire her son's strength but to be inspired by it.

To begin with, here is a woman, a mother, riding a bike. This is an act which in the 1970s was still considered a child's activity. The adult sport of biking had not yet been popularized. So for readers of this poem, when it was first published, the image of a mom on a bike racing her son paints a different picture than it might today. To the reader of the 1970s, this immediately portrays a woman who is filled with awe of a child's world. The woman in this poem is very comfortable with herself; to further this image, the narrator confides that not only is this mother racing her son on a bicycle, she is riding with "no hands." Some readers might interpret this by stating that she is showing off. However, someone else reading this poem might conclude that this woman must either be very confident in herself or that she does not really care about who will win the race between her son and herself. Another possibility might be that this mother is merely enjoying her sense of freedom in acting childlike. Whatever image comes to mind, the overall feeling that is portrayed is one of comfort. This woman is comfortable in her role as mother.

She remains comfortable even when her son passes her. The narrator first states that the mother is "ahead" in the bicycle race for home, but then her son catches her and shortly afterward buzzes past her. With this portrayal of the so-called bicycle race, Ostriker reflects on the natural path of parenthood. The mother is ahead, in a sense, when the child is first born. Her newborn baby is totally dependent on her and must learn all the basics of survival: to eat, to walk, to run, to talk. Then as both the mother and the child age, the young boy gains strength and eventually passes her. But this is not something to regret. This is something to celebrate. Mother and child, although they share a path for a while, have different lives to lead. As she sits back on the seat of her bike, with the "*Times* crossword" puzzle "tucked" in her "rack," her son flashes past her,

fast as the "Green Hornet." Her son has energy to burn. She is in more of a meditative mode. He pierces time in his rush toward the future. In contrast, she, in the middle years of her life, reflects equally on her experience of the past and the dreams, as embodied in her son, that lie "ahead" of her.

With these images, Ostriker shows that bearing children does not hold her back from becoming fully developed and confident as a woman any more than a mother might hold back her son from maturing. Mother and child are separate entities, each surviving off their own strength but at the same time encouraging one another through their separate journeys. Children do not erode a woman's role, Ostriker appears to be saying, they enhance it. They give as much as they take.

Furthering this idea is the next image that Ostriker advances in the second stanza of her poem. Here the mother and the son are at the swimming pool, where the mother watches her son perform his "neat one-and-a-half flips" off the diving board. She congratulates him with the words "oh, brave." The narrator demonstrates the mother's feelings by having her refer to Juno, the goddess and wife of Jupiter, and Oceanus, the god of the sea. In other words, in experiencing the courage of her son, the mother feels godlike; for it was through her that her son entered this world. Motherhood, Ostriker's poem states, has elevated her; has, in some way, enhanced her mortality; has blessed her. It is off of her, as if she is the springboard (the diving board), that her son jumps, soars, and spins, exhibiting his bravery to the world.

As depicted in the actions of some children nearby, Ostriker touches on the confusion of war and racism that was infiltrating her world when she wrote this poem. However, through the children (and obliquely through motherhood) she brings the concept of hope into her poem. She watches "some black and white boys wrestling," a sight that could have potentially represented conflict; but Ostriker turns this conflict into fun by stating that the boys were "joking, teammates," who were using the act of wrestling as an excuse to touch each other, thus proving that "it is not necessary to make hate." If there is any hope in the world that people will come to accept one another and turn their hate into love and sharing, Ostriker sees it in the children. She not only embraces motherhood here, she takes motherhood to a higher realm. It is through motherhood, she states, that people create these new little souls and train them in new ways. Thus motherhood becomes a sacred duty.

In the third stanza, Ostriker elaborates this point by referring to the poet Walt Whitman's thoughts as espoused in his "A Song of Myself." In that poem, Whitman is talking to a child who asks him to explain what grass is. In trying to clarify it to the child, Whitman meanders through many different thoughts, but in the end he uses the youngest sprout of grass, the regeneration of grass, as a symbol that there really is no such thing as death. In the same way, Ostriker implies, children bring immortality to their parents. What possible calling could be higher or more purposeful than that?

She then ends her poem with her son asking if it is all right with her if he "takes off." She watches him as he "peels away," as if he has been attached to her but is learning to pull away on his own. He is her son. He came into this world through her, but he is

becoming his own "rocket and pilot." He has developed his own means to propel himself and is steering that vehicle into the future.

Her poem, in the end, shows that the role of mother is not diametrically opposed to feminist beliefs. Rather, it might more clearly personify them. Feminism does not mean that women should "race" against men and try to beat them. It does not mean that women who enjoy motherhood relinquish their opportunity to make their voices heard in the world. Feminism, as found in this poem, might well mean that women and men can work together; that nurturing others is not a weakness but rather a strength; and that motherhood, although it comes without a salary and does not require a college degree, is an honorable and self-satisfying profession.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "His Speed and Strength," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Williams discusses Ostriker's life and writings.

Like several women poets in her generation, including Sandra Gilbert, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker, Alicia Ostriker also writes as a literary critic. Clear and lyrical, her poetry combines intelligence and passion. Speaking in the tradition of Walt Whitman, she recreates the American experience in each of her volumes. Her voice is personal, honest, and strong; her poetry incorporates family experiences, social and political views, and a driving spirit that speaks for growth and, at times, with rage.

Ostriker's urban background contributes to the forcefulness of her work. Born in Brooklyn on 11 November 1937, she was a "Depression baby" and grew up in Manhattan housing projects. Her parents, David and Beatrice Linnick Suskin, both earned degrees in English from Brooklyn College. Her father worked for the New York City Department of Parks; her mother, who wrote poetry and read William Shakespeare and Robert Browning to her daughter, tutored students in English and math and later became a folk-dance teacher. Alicia began writing poetry in childhood and enjoyed drawing as well. Her earliest hope was to be an artist: she studied art as a teenager and young adult and continues to carry a sketchbook on her travels. Two of her books□*Songs* (1969) and *A Dream of Springtime* (1979)□feature her graphics in the cover designs.

Ostriker received her B.A. in English from Brandeis University in 1959, and her M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin (1961, 1964). Her dissertation, on William Blake, became her first critical book, *Vision and Verse in William Blake* (1965); she later edited and annotated Blake's complete poems for Penguin (1977). Blake has continued to influence Ostriker as a person and poet. Ostriker began teaching at Rutgers University in 1965 and now holds the rank of full professor.

Much of the work in her first collection, *Songs*, was written during her student years. The voice is relatively formal, reflecting the influences of John Keats, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and W. H. Auden, as well as Whitman and Blake. Imagist and freeverse poems mingle somewhat tentatively with traditional, metrical poetry.

In Ostriker's second and third volumes of poetry□the chapbook *Once More out of Darkness* (1971) and *A Dream of Springtime*□a more personal voice emerges, which captures the mind of the reader more readily. For these books, Ostriker composed consistently in free verse. The title poem of *Once More Out of Darkness* is a meditation on pregnancy and childbirth. *A Dream of Springtime* begins with a sequence of autobiographical poems designed to enable her to exorcise her childhood and become "freed from it." The organization of the book moves concentrically from the self, to the family, to teaching experiences, to the larger world of politics and history. Reviewer Valerie Trueblood calls Ostriker "one of the most intelligent and lyrical of American poets," who has given herself the "difficult assignment" of creating "an intellectually bearable picture of domestic security" while at the same time assigning herself "the

equally ticklish (for poetry) job of publicizing national folly and soft spots of the culture" (*Iowa Review*, Spring 1982).

By the end of the book Ostriker emerges from the confined walls of her past and finds herself in the spring of her life. The title poem "A Dream of Springtime" reflects her movement into spring and its cold, watery vigor that wakes her senses: "The creek, swollen and excited from the melting / Freshets that are trickling into it everywhere / Like a beautiful woman unafraid is dashing / Over the stones." Nonetheless, Ostriker calls her attempt to reconcile herself to her childhood only "partially successful" but an important step in her development as a poet.

Not until *The Mother/Child Papers* (1980) did Ostriker fully reach her medium. In this book she contrasts the events of her own life with the Vietnam War. The book begins after the birth of her son, Gabriel, in 1970, but also focuses on the other members of her family: her husband, Jeremiah P. Ostriker, an astrophysicist, to whom she was married in December 1958; and her daughters, Rebecca and Eve, born in 1963 and 1965. Mary Kinzie in the *American Poetry Review* commends Ostriker on how her "work details the achievement of a connection between personal history and public fact" (July/August 1981). James McGowan in the *Hiram Poetry Review* (Fall/Winter 1982) calls the book "a product of a whole person, which is not to say a perfect person, but one alive to present, past, future, to the body and its mystifying requirements and capacities." Confronting her roles as mother, wife, and professor, Ostriker explores her identity as a woman. As she points out in the essay "A Wild Surmise: Motherhood and Poetry" in her book *Writing Like a Woman* (1983), "the advantage of motherhood for a woman artist is that it puts her in immediate and inescapable contact with the sources of life, death, beauty, growth and corruption."

The Mother/Child Papers was a ten-year project. At its inception, Ostriker had only a vague idea of what she wanted to accomplish; she struggled intermittently with it while teaching and raising her family. The offer of the Los Angeles poet and editor of Momentum Press, Bill Mohr, to publish the manuscript if she could finish it, enabled her to define its ultimate shape. The book is experimental, divided into four sections, all of which build on the artist's experience as mother.

The first section, written in prose, juxtaposes the impact of the Cambodian invasion and the shooting of student protestors at Kent State University with the birth of Ostriker's son in the sterile environment of an American hospital, where, during labor, she was given an unwanted spinal injection that deprived her of the ability to "give birth to my child, myself." Ostriker recreates the personal world of mother and infant in section 2, alternating their voices and molding them together in their own private sphere, separate from the rest of the world yet vulnerable to its incursions: "We open all the windows / the sunlight wraps us like gauze."

Part 3 of *The Mother/Child Papers* consists of a series of poems, written over a ten-year span, that captures the environment of the family and confronts the issue of "devouring Time, an enemy familiar to all mothers" (*Writing Like a Woman*). In "The Spaces" time is stressed, and the chaos of the outside world seems to threaten the secure nucleus of

the family. The speaker overhears her husband discussing "the mass of the universe" and the possibility that it might "implode . . . back to the original fireball" it once was. As this discussion continues, her mind closes in on her own universe and her family's private world: "Gabriel runs upstairs. Rebecca is reading. Eve takes the hat back, . . . / Outside my window, the whole street dark and snowy."

Ostriker ties the work together in part 4 by stressing the connection between motherhood and art. In the final poem of the book, she recreates the experience of a woman in labor who enjoys her pain and is "comfortable" as she "rides with this work / for hours, for days / for the duration of this / dream." The mother is seen as the source of life's energy and of the universe beginning its never-ending process.

Ostriker continues to confront her role as a woman in her next collection of poems, *A Woman Under the Surface* (1982). X. J. Kennedy commended her "wit, verve and energy" (*Poetry*, March 1983). Lynda Koolish called the book "Cool, cerebral, studied. Passionate visceral, immediate . . . cold and fiery at the same time . . . the central metaphor of *A Woman Under the Surface* is a surfacing, emerging woman" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 September 1983).

Written while Ostriker was working on her critical book *Writing Like a Woman*, this 1982 collection clearly reflects the world of women's poetry and Ostriker's indebtedness to it. The first poem, "The Waiting Room," suggests the bond of fear many women share: "We think of our breasts and cervixes. / We glance, shading our eyelids, at each other." Ostriker imagines a female ritual: "Perhaps we should sit on the floor. / They might have music for us. A woman dancer / Might perform, in the center of the circle." But the ritual is not pleasant: "What would she do? / Would she pretend to rip the breasts from her body?" Even this vision of unity is punctured as a woman's scream permeates the room from inside the office; the scream suggests the need these women have to express themselves and the satisfaction of a release that is sometimes denied them.

In "The Exchange" a mysteriously powerful woman emerges from underwater to murder the speaker's children and husband. In "The Diver," on the other hand, as in Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck," the female diver's body "is saying a kind of prayer." Ostriker's diver feels safe: "Nobody laughs, under the surface. / Nobody says the diver is a fool." Losing her name yet finding her space and her identity, "she extends her arms and kicks her feet," escaped from "the heat" and confinement of a surface world. Other poems in this volume touch on art□as in the poems to Henri Matisse, Vincent van Gogh, and Claude Monet□ and myth, as in Ostriker's rewritten versions of the stories of Eros and Psyche, Orpheus and Euridice, and Odysseus and Penelope.

Ostriker continues to speak in her feminist voice in *The Imaginary Lover* (1986) and goes one step further. In an anonymous review in *Publisher's Weekly*, her poetry was described as "a poetry of commitment, not so much to womankind as to humankind. . . . When the voice of this rational, scholarly woman rises to crescendo, a tide of sweet human emotion lifts the poem into the realm of true experience with Keatsian intensity" (24 October 1984).

Written while Ostriker was researching her second feminist book of criticism, *Stealing the Language: the Emergence of Women Poets in America* (1986), the collection reflects the influences of Rich and H. D. In *The Imaginary Lover* Ostriker confronts the fantasies, both beautiful and horrible, that accompany womanhood. A long poem, "The War of Men and Women" explores the difficulty of male-female relations as "an archeology of pain." Several poems look at mother-daughter relationships from the perspective of the mother and that of the daughter; several are portraits of marriage. In the final poem of this book, Ostriker creates a woman's imaginary lover. Like the lovers in H. D.'s poetry, he is androgynous: "Oh imaginary lover, oh father-mother." He is not, however, the speaker's male counterpart, but rather the "form in the mind / On whom, as on a screen, I project designs." It is through this projected perception that the speaker becomes "the flock of puffy doves / . . . in a magician's hat" capable of the liberty of flight.

Green Age (1989) is Ostriker's most visionary and most successful collection. As Gail Mazur wrote in *Poetry*, "The poems are expressions of the hungry search for her real and spiritual place in the world. . . . A tough empathy informs the poems she is no softer on others than she is on herself" (July 1990).

The three sections of the book confront personal time, history and politics, and inner spirituality. The speaker's voice in many of these poems is full of an anger that requires healing transformation. The energy for survival is reflected through the female character of "A Young Woman, a Tree," who has withstood her harsh surroundings and has developed a "Mutant appetite for pollutants." She is that city tree that can "feel its thousand orgasms each spring" and "stretch its limbs during the windy days." This woman takes a hungry bite of the world and experiences its pleasures, despite the pain of encroaching time. Another theme is the need for feminist spirituality in the face of traditional religion. Ostriker suffers in her Jewish heritage, for as a woman she is both the "vessel" of religious lineage and deprived of spiritual participation in male-dominated Jewish ritual and intellectual life. "A Meditation in Seven Days" considers and challenges the roles of women and femaleness within Judaism, concluding with a vision of potential change: "Fearful, I see my hand is on the latch / I am the woman, and about to enter." The final poem of *Green Age*, "Move," captures the mood of Ostriker's continuing quest for identity as woman and poet:

When we reach the place we'll know
We are in the right spot, somehow, like a breath
Entering a singer's chest, that shapes itself
For the song that is to follow.

The poetry of Alicia Ostriker consistently challenges limitations. For discovery to take place there must be movement, and Ostriker refuses to stand still; each volume tries to uncover anew what must be learned in order to gain wisdom, experience, and identity. She is a poet who breaks down walls.

Source: Amy Williams, "Alicia Ostriker," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 120, *American Poets Since World War II, Third Series*, edited by R. S. Gwynn, Gale Research, 1992, pp. 239-42.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Herzog discusses Ostriker's role as both poet and critic.

Throughout her career, poet-critic Alicia Ostriker has resisted the pressures which privilege one creative identity over the other, poet before the critic or critic before the poet. Her life's writing□ five scholarly books, eight books of poetry and a ninth book (*The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions*, 1994) which marvelously blends both prose and poetry□steadfastly refuses the prevalent cultural rift between poets and scholars. In a beautifully crafted autobiographical essay, "Five Uneasy Pieces" (1997), she writes: "I have tried to make my criticism and poetry feed each other. To write intelligent poems and passionate criticism." Reviewing her critical and poetic accomplishments, one cannot help but conclude that she has succeeded.

Her critical-scholarly career began with the publication of Vision and Verse in William Blake (1965), a meticulous analysis of Blake's prosody which still serves as an invaluable resource in the study of Blake's technique. Ostriker's choice of Blake as a poetic mentor reveals much about her early (and enduring) poetic tastes. In "The Road of Excess: My William Blake," Ostriker traces the history of her "romance with Blake":

> What did I like? First of all, Blake had the reputation of being "mad." I liked that. He wrote as an outsider; I liked that because I was one myself. His white-hot intellectual energy excited me, along with his flashing wit and irony, his capacity for joy and delight.

She continues to detail her recognition of Blake's own masculinist biases which propelled her towards a search for the women poets who could articulate what Blake could not. Reflecting on her successful search, she recounts, "I found a radical collective voice and vision equivalent to Blake's□ equivalently outrageous, critical of our mindforged manacles, determined to explore and rethink everything, and inventing poetic forms to embody new visions." Ostriker has gone on from this epiphany to write two significant books which detail her growing passion for the works of women poets: *Writing Like a Woman* (1983) and *Stealing the Language of Poetry: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986). The latter is particularly noteworthy in its ambitious mapping of an identifiable tradition of women's poetry in America, beginning with Anne Bradstreet and continuing to the 1980s. According to James E. B. Breslin, "*Stealing the Language* is literary history as it should be written□based on an extraordinary range of reading, written with passionate involvement, grounded in acute readings of particular poems and filled with provocative general statement."

Critical responses to Ostriker's poetry are quick to remark on what feminist scholar Elaine Showalter calls her "unwavering intelligence" as well as her "compassionate and ironic" voice. In terms of focus and thematic concerns, her books of poetry vary widely. While her work is grounded in her identity as both woman and feminist, her poems are

not restricted to the recording of female experiences or consciousness. As a *Publisher's Weekly* reviewer comments, "Hers is a poetry of commitment, not so much to womankind as to humankind." Diana Hume George notes that Ostriker's "prophetic" vision "makes her return endlessly to the ordinary, phenomenal world, inhabited by women and men like herself, where the real work must be done."

In "Five Uneasy Pieces," Ostriker describes the affirmative, life-embracing vision under girding poetry:

. . . there was always a part of me for which
everything, the brick building of public housing,
cracked sidewalks, delivery trucks, subways,
luminous sky of clouds, wicked people□was spectacle.
Glorious theater. The vitality of those hard
streets, poverty and ignorance bawling through our
lives, was a sight to behold. The swing and punch of
the bad language I was told not to imitate was live
music to my ears, far more interesting than proper
English. Literature□any art□exists to embody such
perception. Exists to praise what is. For nothing.

Thus, we find in one of her earliest books, "Sonnet. To Tell the Truth," an ironic poem about the brick Housing Authority buildings" of her childhood in Brooklyn, New York, "For whose loveliness no soul had planned"; or alternately, her meditation on "the kindliness of old men . . . something incommunicably vast," as she remembers the lost grandfathers and older male friends who nurtured the young girl-child, "Petted me, taught me checkers patiently." She concludes, "It seems to me then God's a grandfather; / Infinite tenderness, infinite distance□ / I don't a minute mean that I believe this! / It's but a way to talk about old men" ("Old Men").

Ostriker writes poems about marriage, struggles for intimacy, childbirth, the necessary, painful separations between parent and child, teaching, art, aging, losses, desire, and more. Throughout, her love of the world is unabated. In "Hating the World," she tells a former student, "Do you know, to hate the world / Makes you my enemy?," while in "The Death of Ghazals," we read: "Where there's life there's hope. We bequeath this hope / To our children, along with our warm tears." Ostriker's persistent poetic faith in the face of hard truths culminates in her 1996 collection, *The Crack in Everything*, where among other poems of beauty and survival she includes "The Mastectomy Poems," created from her own experience with breast cancer. "You never think it will happen to you, / What happens every day to other women," she begins. In them, Ostriker fulfills her own poetic mandate: "to press the spirit forth / Unrepentant, struggling to praise / Our hopeless bodies, our hopeless world" ("The Book of Life").

Most recently, Ostriker's poetry and criticism have focused on her identity as both woman and Jew. She states in *People of the Book: Thirty Scholars Reflect on Their Jewish Identity* that she feels "a preoccupation amounting to obsession with Judaism,

the Bible, God." In "Five Uneasy Pieces," Ostriker places her current work "in the tradition of midrash," retelling the Biblical narratives in search of a spiritual home within Judaism. *The Nakedness of the Fathers* (1994) is a remarkable testament to the passion and intelligence of Ostriker's career, ample evidence of the poetic and critical distances she has traveled and a clue to where she may be heading. Refuting accusations of blasphemy, witchery, ignorance or insanity, Ostriker writes:

I remember things, and sometimes I remember
My time when I was powerful, bringing birth
My time when I was just, composing law
My time playing before the throne
When my name was woman of valor
When my name was wisdom
And what if I say the Torah is
My well of living waters
Mine

Source: Anne F. Herzog, "Ostriker, Alicia," in *Contemporary Women Poets*, edited by Pamela L. Shelton, St. James Press, 1998, pp. 271-73.

Topics for Further Study

Research and discuss the differences between men and women, in terms of speed and strength. Organize your research into a short report, using charts, graphs, and other graphics wherever possible.

Research the differences between male and female styles of communication. Imagine that you are a member of the opposite sex. Now, write a journal entry that describes the difficulties you have communicating with someone from the opposite sex (i.e., your actual sex).

Choose one female athlete, from any point in history, who has competed successfully with men. Write a short biography about this woman.

Read any of the classic texts from Carl Jung or other modern researchers who were among the first to discuss the psychological differences between men and women. Compare the ideas in this text to the latest research concerning the differences between the sexes.

Compare and Contrast

Late 1970s/Early 1980s: Following the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans and other minorities move into positions of political and economic power in America.

Today: While African Americans and other minorities have made several gains on the path to equality, race relations remains a tense issue. Following attacks by Middle Eastern terrorists on American soil in 2001, hate crimes against Americans of Middle Eastern heritage increase.

Late 1970s/Early 1980s: Following the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, women in some parts of the world have more choices on how to live their lives, and many try to balance work and family roles. Highprofile women are recognized in both traditionally feminine and masculine roles. Mother Theresa of Calcutta receives the 1979 Nobel Prize for Peace. The same year, Margaret Thatcher becomes Europe's first woman prime minister. She is noted for her combative political style.

Today: The current state of the achievements of feminism is debated. Although women occupy many power roles traditionally held by men, such as CEO positions in major companies, others choose to become housewives. New studies indicate that women may experience infertility problems after their late twenties, prompting some people to speculate that women may once again have to choose between career and family. During the last half of the Clinton presidency, Madeleine Albright, a female politician noted for her aggressive political style, becomes the first American woman to hold the position of secretary of state.

Late 1970s/Early 1980s: British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and American President Ronald Reagan join forces in the Cold War struggle against communism in general and the Soviet Union in particular.

Today: British Prime Minister Tony Blair and American President George W. Bush join forces in the struggle against terrorism in general and Iraq in particular.

What Do I Read Next?

Betty Friedan's controversial *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) helped to launch the modern women's movement. The book shatters the myth that post-World War II housewives were happy taking care of their husbands and children. Friedan labeled this misconception the feminine mystique and used her book to reveal the pain and frustration that many women faced when their needs were placed below the needs of their families.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) describes a feminist utopia. In the idealistic world that Gilman creates, women rule their own country, where they do not need men to reproduce. Three male explorers from the United States find this isolated country and name it Herland. The men are surprised to find that the women are equal to them and are shocked when the women do not respond to the same types of charms that work on women in the United States.

John Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships* (1992) is a bestselling selfhelp book that discusses the differences between male and female styles of communication.

Ostriker's poetry collection titled *The Imaginary Lover* (1986), like many of her works, explores feminist themes, including the relations between men and women.

Ostriker's *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women Poets in America* (1986) is her best-known work of feminist literary criticism. This controversial book explores the idea that women's writing is distinct from men's writing because it focuses on issues that are central to the female gender.

In her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf argues that for women writers to achieve the same greatness that male writers have, these women need an income and privacy. In addition, Woolf discusses the fact that the idealistic and powerful portrayals of women in fiction have historically differed from the slave-like situations that many women face in real life.

Further Study

Helgesen, Sally, *The Female Advantage: Women's Ways of Leadership*, Currency/Doubleday, 1995.

Helgesen explores how women's management styles differ from their male counterparts. The author says that women, who tend to lead via a relationship web, are better suited for the modern business environment than men, who tend to lead via old-fashioned hierarchies. The book also provides in-depth profiles of four women executives who became successful as a result of their female qualities of leadership.

Hill, Gareth S., *Masculine and Feminine: The Natural Flow of Opposites in the Psyche*, Shambhala Publications, 1992.

This book offers a comprehensive analysis of the masculine and the feminine, drawing on the original psychological theories of Carl Jung as well as on non-Jungian approaches.

Kallen, Stuart A., ed., *The 1980s*, Cultural History of the United States through the Decades series, Lucent Books, 1999.

Each book in this series examines a specific decade through theme-based chapters, which place events in a cultural context. Among other topics, the 1980s volume discusses the Reagan presidency, the fall of Communism, the rise of Wall Street and corporate power, and the computer revolution. The book also includes a bibliography and a detailed chronology of events.

Moir, Anne, and David Jessel, *Brain Sex: The Real Difference between Men and Women*, Lyle Stuart, 1991.

In this groundbreaking book, Moir, a geneticist, and Jessel, a BBC-TV writer-producer, discuss the differences between male and female brains, identifying the innate abilities of each.

Schneir, Miriam, ed., *Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present*, Vintage Books, 1994.

This anthology focuses on contemporary writings from the second half of the twentieth century and features fifty selections, including many excerpts from longer works. Schneir also provides commentary on the writings.

Bibliography

Cook, Pamela, "Secrets and Manifestos: Alicia Ostriker's Poetry and Politics," in *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, Vol. 2, Spring 1993, pp. 80-86. Heller, Janet Ruth, "Exploring the Depths of Relationships in Alicia Ostriker's Poetry," in *Literature and Psychology*, Vol. 38, No. 1-2, 1992, pp. 71-83. Ostriker, Alicia, "His Speed and Strength," in *The Little Space: Poems Selected and New, 1968-1998*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998, p. 44. □, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, Beacon Press, 1986. □, *Writing Like a Woman*, University of Michigan Press, 1983. Roberts, J. M., *Twentieth Century: The History of the World, 1901 to 2000*, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 673. Rosenberg, Judith Pierce, "Profile: Alicia Suskin Ostriker," in *Belles Lettres*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Spring 1993, pp. 26-29. Williams, Amy, "Alicia Ostriker," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 120, *American Poets Since World War II, Third Series*, Gale Research, 1992, pp. 239-42.

BOOKRAGS

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

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

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