Incident in a Rose Garden Study Guide

Incident in a Rose Garden by Donald Justice

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Introduction

Donald Justice included "Incident in a Rose Garden" in his 1967 collection of poems, *Night Light* , and revised the poem for his *Selected Poems* , published by Atheneum, in 1979. Unlike most of Justice's other poems, "Incident in a Rose Garden" tells a story. The three characters, the Gardener, the Master, and Death, play out a familiar scene in which Death, whom Justice describes in stereotypical fashion as adorned in black and being "thin as a scythe," mistakes the identity of one character for another. The language is simple, yet formal, the dialogue straightforward, the theme clear: Death may come when least expected; live life with that thought in mind. Other themes addressed include the relationship of human beings to nature, self-deception, and fate versus self-creation. In its use of stock characters and situation and its obvious moral, the poem resembles a medieval allegory.

In the revised version of "Incident in a Rose Garden," Justice moves from an objective point of view, which contains only the dialogue of the characters, to a first person point of view in which the Master relates the story. This change allows for a more detailed description of the Gardener and Death and gives the surprise ending more bite. The relationship between a consciousness of death and an appreciation of life is a theme in Wallace Stevens's poetry, which Justice notes as a primary influence on his own writing. Justice dedicates the poem to poet Mark Strand who, like Justice, writes about the presence of death in everyday life and the ways in which the self responds to and is shaped by that presence. Strand was a student of Justice's at the University of Iowa.

Author Biography

Donald Rodney Justice was born in Miami, Florida, in 1925 to Vascoe J., a carpenter, and Mary Ethel Cook Justice, both of whom had moved to Florida from Georgia in the early 1920s. His mother encouraged Justice's interest in the arts early in his life, providing him with piano lessons, and Justice has remained passionate about music and art throughout his life. In Miami, Justice studied with composer Carl Ruggles, one of the first professional artists he ever met, and poet George Marion O'Donnell, who taught him how to read poets such as Thomas Hardy in a new way. After earning his bachelor's degree in English from the University of Miami, Justice moved to New York City for a year before resuming his studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he earned a master's degree in 1947. Although enrolled in Stanford's doctoral program for a year, Justice felt the pace of the program was too slow. He left to study in the Writing Workshop at the University of Iowa, where he received his Ph. D. in 1954. As student and teacher, Justice has worked with many well-known writers including Yvor Winters, Robert Lowell, William Logan, Karl Shapiro, and Charles Wright. One of his students at Iowa, Mark Strand, to whom Justice dedicates "Incident in a Rose Garden," was poet laureate for the United States from 1990 to 1992. Justice is known as a technician of poetry, an accomplished technician who describes himself as "a rationalist defender of the meters." His work is as much influenced by William Carlos Williams as by Wallace Stevens. Though critics sometimes fault his poetry for being too restrained, Justice has developed a reputation as a craftsman who has influenced a good number of younger poets. His poetic output has not been prolific, but it has been steady. His poetry collections include *The Summer Anniversaries* (1960), *Night Light* (1967), *Departures* (1973), and *Selected Poems* (1979). Justice's collection of prose and poetry, *The Sunset Maker: Poems/Stories/A Memoir* , was published in 1987, and his collection of essays, *Oblivion: On Writers and Writing* came out in 1998. In addition to writing poems, Justice has edited a number of books, including *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees* and *Contemporary French Poetry* , and has written a libretto *The Death of Lincoln* . His awards include a Rockefeller Foundation fellow in poetry, Lamont Poetry Award, a Ford Foundation fellowship in theater, National Endowment for the Arts grants, a Guggenheim fellowship, and the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for *Selected Poems* . A professor for most of his adult life, Justice retired from the University of Florida in 1992.

Poem Text

Gardener: Sir, I encountered Death
Just now among our roses.
Thin as a scythe he stood there.
I knew him by his pictures.
He had his black coat on,
Black gloves, a broad black hat.
I think he would have spoken,
Seeing his mouth stood open.
Big it was, with white teeth.
As soon as he beckoned, I ran.
I ran until I found you.
Sir, I am quitting my job.
I want to see my sons
Once more before I die.
I want to see California.
Master: Sir you must be that stranger
Who threatened my gardener.
This is my property, sir.
I welcome only friends here.
Death: Sir, I knew your father.
And we were friends at the end.
As for your gardener
I did not threaten him.
Old men mistake my gestures.
I only meant to ask him
To show me to his master.
I take it you are he?

Plot Summary

Title

The title of the poem makes use of understatement in the same way as the poem. By titling the poem "Incident in a Rose Garden" instead of, for example, "Death Visits the Master," Justice creates a sense of mystery, of suspense. Readers are never told directly the significance of what is happening but must make the connections themselves. Setting the poem in a rose garden underscores the relationships among death, nature, and human beings and shows the folly of human beings in thinking that they are somehow not a part of the natural world, which includes death.

Gardener

In the first stanza of "Incident in a Rose Garden," the Gardener addresses his Master, telling him that he "encountered Death" in the garden. The Gardener recognized him "through his pictures," meaning the stereotypical ways that death has been personified in painting and illustrations: all in black and "thin as a scythe." This description evokes death's identity as the grim reaper. A scythe is an instrument with a long blade used to cut crops or grass. It belongs in a garden. The personification of death, however, is as old as humankind and forms a part of every culture. The image of Death's wide-open mouth evokes the devouring void, the very nothingness that comes with the cessation of consciousness. His teeth are predatory, and the end rhymes of "open / spoken" have a hypnotic effect. The formality of the Gardener's language belies his experience. Readers wouldn't expect someone who just encountered death to respond with such a restrained tone. It is this restraint, however, helped by the formal restraint of three-line stanzas and three-beat lines, that gives the poem its shape.

The Gardener relates his fear that Death had come for him. Readers can infer that he is quitting because he believes that he has only a short time to live. It is common for people, when told they are going to die, to put their affairs in order and to prioritize what is important to them. The Gardener wants to see his sons and to see California before he dies, which are understandable desires. The introduction of California, however, seems anachronistic for this poem, whose word choice and setting seem to predate the discovery of the New World. In this instance, California is a promised land, an exotic place of fantasy, which readers can assume the Gardener has thought about visiting before.

Master

In between dialogue, readers can assume that the Master went to the rose garden to see Death, from whom his Gardener had run. Although the Master addresses Death as "Sir," as his Gardener had addressed him, his words suggest a restrained anger. He accuses Death, whom he refers to as a "stranger," of "threatening" his Gardener, and

warns him off his property, which is ironic since Death has the final say over who and what gets to live in the rose garden. The Master assumes an adversarial stance towards Death, treating him as an intruder when he tells him, "I welcome only friends here." The Master's restraint is heightened by the end rhyme of all of his lines.

Death

Death responds to the Master, telling him, ironically, that he was a friend of his father. Readers can deduce from this that the Master's father is dead. Again, the use of such understatement, a feature of the poem as a whole, is part of the formal speech of the characters and belies the significance of what is actually happening. When Death tells the Master that the reason the Gardener was afraid was that "Old men mistake my gestures," he means that older people live closer to death, believing that it may come at any moment.

In the last three lines of the poem, readers learn that Death's intention for coming to the rose garden was not to take the Gardener but to take the Master. This reversal is an example of situational irony, in which there is a contradiction between expectation and reality.

Themes

Death

"Incident in a Rose Garden" underscores the arrogance of human beings and how they mistakenly assume they are beyond the rules and processes of the natural world. The relationship between the Gardener and the Master parallels the relationship between the Master and Death. In the first relationship, the Gardener treats his Master with the deference and civility of an inferior, even though he quits his job. He comes running to the Master after he sees Death in the garden. The Master, believing that Death has come for the Gardener, in his arrogance refuses to recognize Death's power, calling him a "stranger" and telling him he is not welcome. He assumes that, because he is the owner of the rose garden, he owns death as well and can order him about the same way he orders his servants about. Such hubris is common for many who see themselves as existing separate from the natural world. Many religions warn against making oneself into a god. In the Bible, for example, Proverbs 16.18 says, "Pride goes before destruction, / and a haughty spirit before a fall." Proud human beings sometimes believe that the world somehow exists for them and not the other way around. Death's response to the Master, his measured coolness, and his own extension of "friendship" show who the real Master is, and Death, quite literally, puts the Master in his place.

Nature

The fact that Death appears in the rose garden underscores the place of death in the order of the natural world. He not only encounters the Gardener there but the Master as well, emphasizing that death's dominion is nature itself. A rose garden is a place of great beauty, but that beauty is seasonal. When the season changes, the roses wither and die. So, too, with human beings. Justice, however, shows how death can come unexpectedly and out of season. Although the Gardener is older than his Master and thinks that Death has come for him, in fact, Death has come for the younger man. A rose garden is also a cultivated place, man-made, ordered to human desire. Death's appearance upsets that order, suggesting that humanity's attempt to control nature, like the Master's attempt to order Death out of his garden, is doomed to fail. Death's confidence in the face of the Master's impoliteness, highlights this.

Style

Narrative

"Incident in a Rose Garden" is a dramatized narrative poem. Narrative poems are stories, with characters, a plot, and action, as opposed to lyric poems, which are the utterance of one speaker, often describing or explaining an emotion or thought. This poem is all dialogue and is presented from an objective point of view. This means that the narrator never intrudes to comment on the action or to explain or describe what is happening. In this way, the poem resembles a very short play. Readers have to infer from the dialogue the theme of the story. The organization of the poem into three-line stanzas, whose lines have three beats apiece, makes the work look and sound like a poem.

Personification

When ideas or inanimate things are given human qualities, they are personified. Justice personifies death by drawing on traditional depictions of death and by packing his description with symbolic imagery appropriate to the idea of death. He is dressed in black and is "thin as a scythe" and his mouth "stood open. / . . . with white teeth"—all images we associate with the grim reaper, a popular depiction of death. The Gardener and the Master obviously cannot be personifications, but they do represent two very different social strata.

Historical Context

The time period of "Incident in a Rose Garden" isn't explicit, though its themes, structure, and diction suggest the Middle Ages. Justice's poem evokes the idea of *danse macabre* , or the dance of death, a notion that grew out of Western Europe's response to the bubonic plague, which killed millions of people beginning in the fourteenth century. In paintings and poems, the allegorical concept of danse macabre depicted a procession of people from all walks of life, both living and dead. One of the earliest representations of the dance of death is in a series of paintings (1424-1425) formerly in the Cimetière des Innocents, a cemetery in Paris that was moved in the eighteenth century. These paintings depict a procession of living people from the church and state being led to their graves by corpses and skeletons. The living are arranged according to their rank so as to present an inclusive representation of humanity. This scene is meant to underscore the leveling power of death and the idea that death can come at any time. The earliest use of the term danse macabre occurs in 1376 in a poem by Jean Le Fevre. The obsession with death also found expression during this time in the morality play. Morality plays were allegories in dramatic form, performed to teach viewers the path from sin to salvation and the fragility of earthly life. Justice's poem does not include a procession like the dance of death, but it does include a personification of death and the character types of Master and Gardener, who stand for social classes, and it does emphasize the idea that death does not discriminate based on social status. A few of the more popular morality plays include *Mankind* and *Everyman* . The rate at which the bubonic plague spread and the fact that no one knew what caused it, created a heightened anxiety and uncertainty. Theories were bandied about, including one put forth by scholars at the University of Paris, who held that a combination of earthquakes and astrological forces were responsible for the plague. Many believed that the plague was God's punishment for humanity's sins and that extreme penitence was required to appease God's wrath. Groups of people known as flagellants paraded through towns whipping themselves and criticizing the Catholic Church for not following God's law. Jews also became the scapegoat for the disease, as people frantically sought someone to blame for the epidemic. Thousands of Jews were persecuted and slaughtered by hysterical mobs during this time.

In the mid-1960s, when this poem was written, the United States was becoming more deeply involved with the war in Vietnam. Televised images of the war, including footage of dead soldiers, became a staple of the nightly news. In 1968, shortly after the Tet offensive, American photographer Eddie Adams caught a South Vietnamese security official on film executing a Viet Cong pris oner. For Vietnam War protestors, this photograph served as evidence of the brutalities of the war and undermined American assumptions about the South Vietnamese themselves.

The presence of death and mortality is evidenced throughout *Night Light* . In 1965, Justice himself turned forty years old. "Men at Forty," one of the heavily anthologized poems from the collection, describes Justice's sentiment about this milestone, and other poems in the collection address the idea of mortality and aging and of regret for a life unlived.

Critical Overview

The collection in which "Incident in a Rose Garden" appears, *Night Light* , was Justice's second full-length collection and contains some of his best-known works, including "Men at Forty," "The Man Closing Up," and "The Thin Man." Reviewing the collection, Robert Pawlowski stresses that Justice is more than simply a technically brilliant poet but is "a good poet who is as interested in life, death, hate, love, fun, and sorrow as anyone." Noting the sadness of the poems in the volume, William Pritchard was not as flattering, writing that "the best line in the book is an epigraph" from someone else. In *Shenandoah* , critic Joel Conarroe praises Justice for bringing "a controlled, urbane intensity to his Chekhovian descriptions of loss and the unlived life." Conarroe notes that Justice's poems "are all fairly accessible on one or two careful readings." James McMichael agrees, writing, "Justice is tightly in charge of everything that goes on within his poems, so much so that very few of them are not almost totally accessible after careful reading."

William Hunt considers Justice's poem a conservative response to the often hyper-emotionalism of romanticism, writing, "Mr. Justice's poems are eloquent replies in a classical mode to the all or nothing element in romanticism. The best poems in the book are closest to this anachronistic struggle." Such a struggle expectedly contains a barely restrained tension between "message" and form. Richard Howard notes that the collection emits "a kind of vexed buzz close to the fretful."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Semansky publishes widely in the field of twentieth-century poetry and culture. In the following essay, he considers what is gained and what is lost in Justice's revision of his poem.

Many reasons can dictate why writers revise their work after it has been published: psychological distance from subject matter, a change in aesthetics, a belief that a poem is never finished.

Donald Justice is an inveterate reviser of his own writing. Like Yeats, he believes that revising is a lifelong process and that his poems can always be better. For his *Selected Poems* , Justice revised a number of poems and "Incident in a Rose Garden" substantially. The changes Justice made, however, effectively create a new poem.

The first version of the poem is written as a mini-drama. Three characters interact with one another through dialogue. No narrator intervenes to comment on the action or to describe the setting. It is a spare, elliptical poem, which succeeds because it shows rather than tells the reader what to see. The revised version changes to the master's first person point of view, adds a little explanatory apparatus to the dialogue, and deepens a secondary theme. The poem opens now with these new lines:

The gardener came running,
An old man, out of breath.
Fear had given him legs.

Adding this information allows readers to see the gardener as an old man before Death mentions this fact in his own speech. It also adds action, something the previous version of the poem didn't have. Readers can see the old man running, afraid. After the gardener's words, the master says, "We shook hands; he was off." This revision tells readers that the poem is told from the master's point of view. All subsequent information must be evaluated in light of this detail. The revised version demands that readers be aware that everything they see is seen through the master's eyes. Not only does the master want others to see him as an understanding person, who can empathize with his gardener, but we must also now see Death through the master's eyes as well. The revised version prefaces the master's dialogue with these eleven lines:

And there stood Death in the garden,
Dressed like a Spanish waiter.
He had the air of someone
Who because he likes arriving
At all appointments early
Learns to think himself patient.
I watched him pinch one bloom off
And hold it to his nose—
A connoisseur of roses—

One bloom and then another.
They strewed the earth around him.

These changes have several effects: they deepen the characterization of both Death and the master, and they make what was previously a secondary theme—the relationship of death to beauty—a primary one. By providing more details about Death, Justice creates a character who transcends type. He is almost a dandy here, an aesthete with an inflated sense of himself. But the master's psychological insight into Death's behavior also tells us something about himself. By describing Death as someone "Who because he likes arriving / At all appointments early / Learns to think himself patient," the master shows his ability to read others. This is significant because it makes the reversal at the end of the poem all the more poignant. His insight into Death's demeanor doesn't make him any less vulnerable to Death; it merely makes the fact that he is not Death's master, as he assumes, more ironic. Death's preoccupation with the roses also highlights the idea that beauty only exists because death exists. The very temporal nature of life enables people to experience beauty. Wallace Stevens, whose own poetry influenced Justice's, sums up this thought in these lines from his famous poem "Sunday Morning":

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
Of sure obliteration on our paths,
The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love
Whispered a little out of tenderness,
She makes the willow shiver in the sun
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.

For Stevens, Death has a feminine character. "She" gives birth to beauty, to all the moments of inspiration and feeling human beings experience. For Justice, Death is a male who arrives for appointments early. He is all business, and he takes pleasure in that business. His smelling of the roses is rife with allusions and meaning. It plays off the popular saying that people should "stop and smell the roses," meaning that people should not be all about work but should take time to enjoy the good things in life. Justice's depiction of Death here also underscores Stevens's notion that without death, there could be no beauty. Like human beings, roses die.

The last revision Justice made also deepens a reader's image of Death. Before Death is allowed to speak, the master reports his depiction of it:

Death grinned, and his eyes lit up
With the pale glow of those lanterns
That workmen carry sometimes
To light their way through the dusk.
Now with great care he slid

The glove from his right hand
And held that out in greeting,
A little cage of bone.

These details are true to type. Death appears, as the gardener says, like he does in his pictures. Many of the conventional personifications of death, such as the grim reaper, depict him as an emaciated figure or a skeleton either with black hollow eyes or with eyes that burn. Personifications of death appear in almost all cultures and religious traditions. In the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world, the Angel of Death was called Azrael. Seker was the name for death in ancient Egypt. The Greek personification of death, known as Thanatos, had a twin brother, Morpheus, the god of sleep, while the Romans had Orcus, a thin, pale figure with huge black wings.

The added detail of Death reaching out to shake the master's hand links the revised version of the poem to stories about how death takes his victims. Sammael, the Angel of Death in Jewish folklore, stands above the victim's head, a sword with a suspended drop of poison at its tip, poised to strike. In other incarnations Death carries a rod of fire, a shaft of light, a knife or, like Justice's Death, a scythe. Death in Justice's poem, however, isn't violent, just matter of fact. His demeanor is gentlemanly, almost businesslike. His handshake, not his scythe, is his weapon. A significant detail in Justice's description is that Death wears gloves. Gloves are a marker of the dress of aristocrats, of people of privilege. This detail highlights the fact that Death is more like the master than not.

The revised version of the poem not only adds more information about the characters and changes the emphasis of the poem's theme, but it also establishes a more personal tone. The voice of the master knows Death more intimately, as do readers. By drawing out the encounter between the master and Death, Justice creates a kind of slow-motion scene. The "care" with which Death attempts to physically befriend the master, presages the master's own death. The problem with this revision, of course, is the same as the problem with the movies *Sunset Boulevard* and *American Beauty* : it is narrated by a dead man.

Justice himself was more than a decade older when he revised "Incident in a Rose Garden," so readers might legitimately infer that his revisions are informed, at least in part, by the writer's own experience and growing intimacy with the encroaching inevitability of death. The changes in the poem, then, reflect Justice's own creeping mortality.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Incident in a Rose Garden," in *Poetry for Students* , The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Hart is a freelance writer of literary themes. In this essay, she analyzes the carefully chosen language that Justice uses to produce the variations in attitudes of the three main voices in his poem.

Donald Justice is often referred to as the poet's poet. This title refers to the fact that many poets know and respect his work, many of them having had him as their teacher, but few critics pay much attention to his work because he does not draw the attention of a large, general audience. Although they have won many prestigious awards, his published works are few. He is, in other words, a poet who cherishes quality over quantity. He concentrates on the specifics, carefully choosing his words, filling each one with as much meaning as possible, and then saying no more. And although his words carry much weight, they do not feel heavy. They feel quite ordinary, as a matter of fact. They feel so ordinary that the art behind them, the carefully constructed picture they display, the economy with which the few words say so much in so little time is almost lost if the poem is read only once. To do justice to Justice's work, his poems should be read several times. They should be as read as slowly as the slow, sure pace of Death in Justice's poem "Incident in a Rose Garden."

In "Incident in a Rose Garden," Justice has placed three voices: the Gardener, the Master, and Death, in juxtaposition with one another. The Gardener, the most humble of the three voices, begins the poem with the word "Sir." He is addressing his Master, although the reader does not know this until later. But, by the use of the word "Sir," the reader is immediately confronted with the concept of hierarchy. The Gardener is using very polite language, and he is probably talking to someone he considers of higher rank than himself. He quickly moves past this first word, having completed the required social convention, and by the end of the first line, the Gardener's heart is beating fast out of fear. He has, after all, just encountered Death. Justice writes this first line in language that is clear and simple. He grabs the attention of his readers just as Death has grabbed the attention of the Gardener. Justice is not writing in obscure metaphor or allusion. There is no mistaking that the Gardener has "encountered Death." This being said, the poem moves on.

The second line of this poem conjures up memories of one of the most often quoted first stanzas of poetry ever written. The stanza comes from Robert Herrick (1591-1674). The poem is titled "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." The lines go like this:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may
Old Time is still a-flying
And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying.

Justice appears to have been thinking about Herrick's poem, for he has set his own poem in a rose garden. By doing this and without having to say anything more, Justice

puts this well-established image of the rose as the symbol of life right in the face of his readers. He has stated the entire theme of his poem in two lines: the fear of death and the transitory nature of life. But the poem, of course, does not end here. Justice has much more to say.

Next, the poem goes into a description of death. It is through the description that the reader feels the racing heart of the Gardener. He is excited by the experience but not to the point of wordlessness. The phrase "Thin as a scythe" is as sharp and as threatening as a well-honed butcher's blade. But it is interesting to note that the Gardener recognizes Death not through a personal reference but rather through a picture he has seen. This removes the Gardener, at least by one step, from personal knowing. By distancing the Gardener in this way, Justice makes the Gardener somewhat less mesmerized by Death. He creates the idea, in a very well-planned way, that the Gardener has not known anyone who has died. The Gardener has not really witnessed mortality. As a matter of fact, Justice makes it sound as if this might be the Gardener's first encounter, and although it frightens him, it does not immobilize him. Instead, the Gardener's confrontation with Death has given him an instant epiphany of understanding: he does not want to waste any more time.

The difference between the picture of Death that the Gardener has seen and the image that stands before him is that Death has opened his mouth. And it is in the opening of his mouth that the Gardener sees something he had not seen in the picture: Death's mouth is big "with white teeth." Because Death is dressed all in black, these white teeth must stand out. Having Death open his big mouth and show his teeth is reminiscent of the wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood" saying, "The better to eat you with." This is no quiet picture, and neither is it a fairy tale. This is the real thing. This Death has teeth, and the Gardener is not sticking around to find out who Death is looking for.

With this thought, the Gardener then again politely addresses his Master: "Sir, I am quitting my job." And again, Justice seems to be referring back to Herrick's *carpe diem* ("seize the day") poem, for the Gardener no longer worries about his job; all he wants is to leave. He wants to do the things that he has been putting off, things that he thought he would always have time for later. And then with a little hint of comedy, Justice writes that the Gardener not only wants to see his sons, but he also wants to see California—America's version of the mythological Garden of Paradise.

With the departure of the Gardener, the first half of Justice's poem is complete. And in the next line, once again the word "Sir" is used; only this time it is spoken by the Master, and it is spoken in a voice quite a bit less humble than the Gardener's. The Master is, after all, the master. He is the master of the Gardener and the Garden itself. These are his roses (although earlier the Gardener referred to the flowers as "our roses," using this phrase to imply that he was as protective and caring of them as the Master was—except when it was time for the Gardener to make a neat and abrupt departure to save his own skin). "This is my property, sir," the Master tells Death, and you are not welcome. Why is Death not welcome here? Because he is a "stranger." How unfortunate for the Master that he does not recognize Death. Not only does he not recognize Death, he disbelieves his own gardener's recognition. What could a gardener

know? He is merely a superstitious fool who is easily spooked. And Justice says all this in such few words. How does he do it?

One thing that Justice does is create a tone of voice that is filled with obvious psychological implications. For instance, the tone of his words gives away the psychology of the Master. "You must be that stranger," he says. He does not ask, "Who are you?" Neither does he ask anything else of him. Instead, he attempts to tell Death who he is, and he does this in a tone of admonishment: not only are you a stranger but you have "threatened my [note the possessive pronoun] gardener." Then the Master more or less points out the no trespassing signs that he has posted around the periphery of his private estate, saying, "I welcome only friends here."

There is a guest list implied here. This is a private club, and no one enters without the Master's permission. All this Justice says in four lines.

Now for the climax: Death also begins his part of this poem with the word "Sir." But here Death mocks not only humility but also the Master. Death knows who the real Master is, even if the Master is ignorant of his place in life's hierarchy. Death mocks the Master first with the honorific salutation; then he mocks him by turning the Master's list of friends on its proverbial head. I was a friend of your father's, Death states. "We were friends," he says, but then cleverly adds, "at the end." Here Justice makes several points: First he has Death put the Master in his place. This Master might own the garden, and he might have the right to keep anyone he chooses outside its gates, but he cannot avoid facing Death. And by using the phrase "at the end," Justice is also, in three little words, exposing the identity of Death to the Master. Another interesting thing that is going on here is that this so-called Master, who has witnessed the death of his father, does not recognize Death. Why is that, and what is Justice saying here?

Whereas the Gardener immediately recognized Death and found a way to escape, stating that he has more to do with his life and is not ready to face him, the Master is clueless. Where was the Master when his father died? Is Justice implying that the death of the Master's father was not enough to wake him up to fear Death enough to make the most of his life? Is that why the Master is caught off guard? Was his arrogance his own undoing? Did he think he could live forever? In his statement, "I welcome only friends here," is he repeating a remark that his father once said, and is that why Death counsels him with "we were friends at the end?" Was the Master's father also as arrogant as his son? Death, in this poem, now controls the stage.

He explains himself as humbly as Death can. He did not mean to frighten the gardener. "Old men mistake my gestures." This statement is close to being read as a private joke. The Gardener mistook his gestures to mean that Death was coming for him, whereas the Master mistook his gestures to mean that he was some stranger come to try to win favors. But the last joke is yet to come, and of course Justice portrays it so simply and so powerfully that the last line turns the whole poem inside out. Justice makes fools of everyone, the Master as well as everyone who reads this poem. Of course that is why Death allowed the Gardener to leave. Of course Death knew exactly what he was doing.

Of course the Master did not know what was going on, but neither did any of the readers. "I only meant to ask him / To show me to his master. / I take it you are he?"

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "Incident in a Rose Garden," in *Poetry for Students* , The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

Watershed Tapes distributes an audiocassette of Justice reading his poems, titled *Donald Justice: "Childhood" & Other Poems* (1985).

The audiocassettes *Donald Justice I & II* were released in 1984 and 1989 by New Letters on the Air.

The Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature, Washington, D.C., has audiotapes of Justice reading with Betty Adcock on March 21, 1989.

The Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature, Washington, D.C., has audiotapes of Justice reading with Eavan Boland on October 15, 1992.

Topics for Further Study

Interview your classmates, family, and friends about a time when they had a premonition of death. What similarities do you see in their stories?

Justice dedicated this poem to poet Mark Strand. Read Strand's collection of poems *Darker* . Discuss similarities between the two poets' representation and awareness of death.

Brainstorm a list of ways in which death is visually represented in contemporary art, film, writing, and culture. What gender is death? How old? Where and when does death usually appear? What can you conclude from these facts about society's relationship with death?

Research what happens to the brain in the last minutes before death. Report your findings to your class.

Research the stories of those who have had near-death experiences. How have these people changed their lives as a result of the experience?

If you were told that you were going to die tomorrow, how would you spend your last day? Make an itinerary, right down to your last minute.

Continue the poem, writing one or two three line stanzas in which the master replies to death. Then write another stanza or two in which Death responds. Try to get as close to Justice's tone and style as possible.

Compare and Contrast

1967: The life expectancy for Americans is 70.5 years.

Today: The life expectancy for Americans is almost 77 years.

1967: International Treaty bans weapons of mass destruction from space, and the United Nations approves a nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

Today: Arguing that rogue states could still compromise the United States security and put millions of citizens at risk during a nuclear attack, the Bush administration argues for continuing development on a national missile defense shield.

1967: The World Health Organization begins a program to get rid of the smallpox virus completely, which has killed millions of people in its history. Although the virus had been stamped out in Europe and North America, it still exists in poorer regions of the world. In May 1980, WHO formally announces that smallpox has been eliminated.

Today: More than 33 million people worldwide have been infected with the HIV virus, which can lead to Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). More than two and one half million people die from the virus.

What Do I Read Next?

Justice dedicated "Incident in a Rose Garden" to poet, friend, former student, and former Poet Laureate of the United States, Mark Strand. Like Justice, Strand frequently writes about the absence of the self and the sadness of human life. His *Selected Poems* (1979) is a good introduction to his work.

Philip Ziegler's *The Black Death* (1998) details the plague that gripped Europe from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Ziegler notes that plague probably cost Europe between 12.5 and 70 percent of its population according to region, population density, hygiene, and other factors.

Justice's *New and Selected Poems* (1997) updates his Pulitzer Prize-winning 1979 *Selected Poems* by changing the previous volume's selection and adding many poems written in the intervening fifteen years.

Further Study

Gioia, Dana, "Interview with Donald Justice," in *American Poetry Review* , Vol. 25, No. 1, January/February 1996, p. 37.

Justice discusses the influence of music on his poetry and comments on the proliferation of creative writing programs.

Gioia, Dana, and William Logan, eds. *Certain Solitudes: On the Poetry of Donald Justice* , University of Arkansas Press, 1998.

This book collects essays and reviews written on Justice's poetry. It remains the single best source of criticism on the poet.

Howard, Richard, *Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States since 1950* , Atheneum, 1969.

This collection of essays on post-World War II American poetry by one of America's most insightful critics is useful for those who want to locate Justice's work among his contemporaries.

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BOOKRAGS

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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

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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