Island of the Three Marias Study Guide

Island of the Three Marias by Alberto Rios

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Introduction

Although "Island of the Three Marias" refers to a real geographic place, the poem draws on the literary tradition of islands as locales of the exotic and the fantastic. Umberto Eco's *Island of the Day Before* and H. G. Wells' *Island of Dr. Moreau* are two well-known examples in this tradition. Ríos' poem appears in the second section of his 1985 collection, *Five Indiscretions.* The collection as a whole addresses themes of gender, sexuality, and desire, and the section in which "Island of the Three Marias" appears deals with representations of masculinity and martyrdom. The poem, consisting of six free verse stanzas□alternating quatrains and longer stanzas□presents brief descriptions about three men who live on one of *Las Islas Marias* (The Mary Islands), a group of four islands that are ninety miles off the southwestern coast of Mazatlán,Mexico. Although readers are not explicitly told, the men are either convicts or employees of Islas Marias Federal Prison, which was established on the largest island, Maria Madre, in 1905.

Ríos hones in on a detail of each of the men's lives, letting that detail serve as a symbol for the life as a whole. Even though the poem refers to a real place, like many of Ríos' poems, it has a fantastic and fabulous feel about it and an elegiac tone. Other poems in the section, such as "A Man Walks as if Trapped," "A Man Then Suddenly Stops Moving," "The Carlos Who Died and Left Only This," and "On January 5, 1984, El Santo the Wrestler Died, Possibly," have a similar tone, and all make attempts to symbolically sum up the essence of a particular man's life. Ríos' style is often described as magical realism, a term made popular by Latin American authors such as Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges. Magical realism combines the dreamlike elements of myth and fairy tale with the sharply etched description of everyday events.

Author Biography

Born in 1952 in the border town of Nogales, Arizona, to a British mother, Agnes Fogg Ríos, and a Mexican father, Álvaro Alberto Ríos, Alberto Ríos grew up between two worlds. It is no surprise, then, that his poetry and stories negotiate the borders between fantasy and reality, between the seen and the unseen. In his essay "West Real," Ríos describes his childhood: "I grew up around my father's family, but I look like my mother□which means I got to see two worlds from the beginning, and could even physically experience the difference growing up where I did: I could put, every day of my life, one foot in Mexico and one foot in the United States, at the same time." A daydreamer in school, Ríos learned quickly about what kind of language was valued when his teachers forced him and other Chicano students to give up Spanish. As a result of this Ríos developed a third language, one rooted in the imagination that drew on cartoon imagery, family lore, and his grandmother's recipes. He cultivated this language by scribbling poems on the back of notebooks and continuing to dream about the places he read about but had never seen. Ríos' reading during his high school years included comic books, science fiction, fairytales, and the *World Book Encyclopedia.*

A high school teacher encouraged him to pursue his interest in literature by introducing him to the poetry of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the San Francisco Beat poet. Ríos enrolled at theUniversity of Arizona, where he graduated with degrees in English and creative writing. After a year at law school, Ríos entered Arizona's M.F.A. program, from which he graduated in 1979. Since joining the creative writing faculty atArizona State University in 1982, Ríos has produced a steady output of poetry and short-story collections, winning critical and popular acclaim. His poetry titles include *Whispering to Fool the Wind* (1982), *Five Indiscretions* (1985), *The Lime Orchard Woman* (1988), and *Teodoro Luna's Two Kisses* (1990). His story collections include *The Iguana Killer: Twelve Stories of the Heart, Pig Cookies and Other Stories* (1995), and *The Curtain of Trees: Stories* (1999). Ríos has also published *Capirotada: A Nogales Memoir,* a memoir about growing up on the Mexican border. Ríos has been awarded fellowships by the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts and has won a number of other state and national grants and prizes.

Ríos' motivation to write can perhaps best be summed up in the words of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, which Ríos uses as the epigraph for his first full-length poetry collection, *Whispering to Fool the Wind:* "You see, there are in our countries rivers which have no names, trees which nobody knows, and birds which nobody has described.... Our duty, then, as we understand it, is to express what is unheard of." In all of his writing Ríos attempts to do just that.

Poem Text

The pale nuns of St. Joseph are here
in groups, on the island of the just
arrived from having been somewhere else
and will be leaving soon without scars.
There are really four islands here
but the others are simply ignored.
No one has thought to ask why,
not Faustino, his wife, the children
the others, or even these white nuns
not in a Christian place, prison islands
inherited from the lepers who decomposed.
On this particular island the family makes
a living, and this is their punishment.
A burden placed in the hands of Faustino
the poor man who kills.
This place is the physical moment
for which the nuns are Easter lilies.
White is the frayed habits of the young
women who will not be women here.
He is too young, never married
who feels the two pains:
north, he could have no woman,
here he could, and had none.
He erased the laughing, his own
laughing that echoed□he said came□
from the mouths of those around him
with the needle in his leg
sometimes even though his pants
when he felt that way he felt,
crying pain he called *wife,*
Because of his soft noises then
he sometimes was loaned Mrs. Marez.
Faustino let him, thank you Faustino,
and when she left, whore! to Mrs. Marez.
He knew the truth which was dreaming
to leave this place to do again
what made his father proud
who, carefully, had shown him now.
White is the coldest color handed down
from old to new like one photograph,
like the story of the child martyrs
or the stale candies said to be blessed.
The man in the suit did not care.

His wife who did not come here
suffered from the embarrassment
of marriage with the one
too formal for this frivolous place
because he could be nothing else,
too important to have liked his name,
to have liked the boys
who were everywhere smiling at him.
Fresco Peach, the name he invented.
It reminded him of something
American western, Frisco Pete,
something tough but not quite
and that is better. He stayed inside
so no one would laugh here, and never
told his name to a woman.
A man is ugly, he says to himself,
a man then suddenly stops running.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

The island of the Three Marias to which the title refers is Maria Madre, the largest of the four islands ninety miles off the coast of Mazatlán inMexico, and the home of Islas Marias Federal Prison. The prison is unusual in that convicts live in communities, not behind bars. Those who have earned the privilege have been allowed to bring their families to live with them. Historically, the Catholic church has ministered to the prisoners. The first stanza introduces the "pale nuns ofSt. Joseph," workers for the church. The description of Maria Madre as "the island of the just / arrived from having been somewhere else / and will be leaving soon without scars" refers to the missionaries themselves, who have the freedom to come and go as they please, as opposed to the prisoners, who must remain and who will be scarred by their experience on the island. Ríos uses line breaks effectively in this stanza, enjambing the second line to ironically play on the meaning of "just." This long description of the island also makes humorous use of understatement.

Stanza 2

In addition to Maria Madre, the names of the other three islands are San Juanito, Maria Maga-lena, and Maria Cleophas. They are ignored because the prisoners are confined to the one island. Ríos might also be humorously observing that both Mary Cleophas (the Virgin Mary's sister-in-law) and Mary Magdalene (former prostitute turned saint) have historically been ignored in favor of Mother Mary. All the characters are represented as accepting their lot "even these white nuns / not in a Christian place." Ríos alludes to the use of the island as a leper colony before it became a federal prison in 1905. Historically, leper colonies were established and run by Christian missionaries. The word "white," which appears throughout the poem, in this instance highlights the nuns' racial difference from the Mexican prisoners, who are brown-skinned.

Ríos presents the first named character, Faustino, as a family man whose family's "punishment" is similar to any family's not in prison. Given Ríos' penchant for convoluted sentence structure, the last two lines are ambiguous. Faustino is either himself "the poor man who kills," (alluding perhaps to the crime that put him behind bars) or he is the guard of "the poor man who kills," and that is his burden. In either case he is drawn as a sympathetic character. Faustino is the Spanish name for Faustus, which in Latin means fortunate. Ríos uses the name ironically.

Stanza 3

Preceding each longer stanza Ríos uses a shorter stanza, a quatrain, as a kind of refrain. Whereas the longer stanzas each describe the particularity of a given man, the shorter stanzas provide generic comments on the place. Easter lilies are white and

symbols of Christ's resurrection, and Ríos' comparison of the nuns to the lilies underscores their innocence and virginal status. He also puns on the word "habit," which refers both to their dress and to a ritualized action or, in the nuns' case, a ritualized non-action (i.e., remaining celibate). That they "will not be women here" tells readers that the speaker considers romantic or sexual relations with a man to be a marker of "womanness."

Stanza 4

This stanza describes another man, unnamed, on the island who obviously has a history of troubled relationships with women. His "two pains" are that he could never have a relationship with another woman while on the mainland ("north"), and that even though he could have a relationship on Maria Madre, he has not. The speaker suggests that the man is mentally ill, as he is described as confusing the voices of others with his own: "He erased the laughing, his own / laughing that echoed□he said came□ / from the mouths of those around him / with the needle in his leg." The needle suggests that the man is on medication or perhaps addicted to narcotics. Faustino, the man in the second stanza, acts as a pimp of sorts, "loaning" the man to Mrs. Marez, most likely the wife of another inmate. The young man verbally assaults her when she leaves, calling her a "whore." The stanza ends with the young man "dreaming" of doing what his father had taught him. What this is, is left unsaid. Most likely it has to do with the kind of life the man would have led had he not wound up in prison. Whatever it is, the man longs for it, and it is part of his "truth," what he lives for.

Stanza 5

This stanza, like the previous quatrain, uses the symbol of white. This time, however, instead of innocence, white represents a range of ideas, including memory, sacrifice, and mystery, corresponding to a photograph, the story of child martyrs, and state candies respectively. White is "handed down / from old to new," in the same way that the young man's father had handed down to his son what he knew in the previous stanza. All of the objects that are referred to as being white function as evidence of some sort. A photograph preserves memory and is evidence of an event; "the story of the child martyrs" is evidence of sacrifice, of martyrdom; and the "state candies said to be blessed" are evidence of superstition, and symbolize mystery and the unknown.

Stanza 6

This stanza introduces another unnamed man, possibly an official of the prison, as he is dressed in a suit. Or he may be a white collar criminal or an eccentric one. The speaker represents him as a man who is on Maria Madre because he has failed at other things in his life. The speaker presents this indirectly, though, by describing the man's wife's opinion of him. Readers can infer from the description that the man is arrogant and self-important. The name he chooses for himself, Fresco Peach (fresh peach), and the fact

that he "never / told his name to a woman" suggests an ambiguous sexuality. Ríos ends the poem with this man's thought of self-loathing mixed also with self-acceptance or resignation. The poem can be read as a triptych, that is, as a trio of portraits of men who inhabit Maria Madre, and the effect that the island has had on them.

Themes

Sexism

"Island of the Three Marias" presents the male desire for the opposite sex as an inherently destructive drive which often results in contempt for females. This expression of this contempt is sometimes referred to as misogyny, which means hatred of women. Each of the three men described displays either implicit or overt loathing for females. Faustino pimps for Mrs. Marez, securing the "too young man" for her pleasure; the "too young man," who tellingly calls his pain "wife," calls Mrs. Marez a "whore" after she leaves; and the man in the suit, who takes the (to him) macho name Fresco Peach, never tells his name to a woman. Apart from Mrs. Marez, the other women in the poem are "the pale nuns ofSt. Joseph," who the speaker says "will not be women" on the island, presumably because they will not have relations with men. Such a conventional notion of what makes a woman a woman, while not misogynistic, per se, nevertheless perpetuates a stereotypical image of female identity, an image based on what women can do for men.

Atonement

"Island of the Three Marias," a poem about the desires of men who live in a penal colony, questions the idea that prisons can be places of rehabilitation where criminals can atone for their mistakes and remake themselves. Ríos presents the missionaries as largely ineffectual, saying that "they will be leaving soon without scars," underscoring the scarring that occurs to those who stay on the island. The fact that no one, not even the nuns, asks why the other islands are ignored suggests that those on the island are resigned to their fates, even the "white nuns / not in a Christian place."

Echoing the idea of scarring, Ríos draws attention to the history of the islands, writing that they are "inherited from the lepers who decomposed." Christian missionaries have a tradition of working with lepers whom society has shunned. Leprosy, primarily a tropical disease, is chronic but it is not easily transmitted, as is the popular belief. Nor does the disease cause the skin to fall off. Ríos, however, plays off both of these images to suggest the similarity between lepers and criminals. In the Old Testament of the Bible lepers are the unclean whom God is punishing for their sins. Similarly, the inhabitants of Maria Madre are being punished for their wrongs, but not by God. By focusing on details or events which show how the men have not changed, Ríos explicitly questions the usefulness of religion in the prisoners' lives.

Alienation and Loneliness

"Island of the Three Marias" uses the setting of a Mexican federal prison to explore the idea of humanity's alienation, one of the primary features of modern society. Ríos does this by presenting a contradiction at the heart of Western legal systems: although

people are imprisoned ostensibly to "pay back" society for their wrongs, they very often become more alienated from society and themselves as a result of their time in prison. Ríos emphasizes the futility of prison as a place for rehabilitation in his description of Faustino, whose "punishment" is his family making a living. The Islas Marias Federal Prison is unique in that prisoners do not live behind bars but in eleven communities throughout the island and work regular jobs. Prisoners on good behavior are allowed to bring their families to live with them during their incarceration.

The young man described in the third stanza is the most manifestly alienated, even from himself, showing signs of mental illness when he cannot distinguish the source of his own laughter. The "man in the suit" simply "does not care" and has given up trying to be a part of society, even on the prison island. Ríos makes plain the symbol of the island as a place of alienation and loneliness by linking it historically to lepers, "who decomposed." The unremitting bleakness of the men's lives and the fact that even the nuns cannot offer solace emphasize the failure of the prison to change the men.

Style

"Island of the Three Marias" employs metaphor and symbol in its three quatrains to comment on the description in the three longer stanzas.

The "scars" in the first quatrain are suggestive of the scars of Christ on the cross; the "Easter lilies" in the second quatrain suggest Christ's resurrection; and the "story of the child martyrs" and the "stale candies said to be blessed" in the last quatrain attest to the ongoing presence and importance of belief, however conceived, and how it is passed down from one generation to the next.

Paleness is used in the first stanza and white in the second and third to symbolize naivete, innocence, purity, rebirth, and hope. All of these images together resonate with both hope and a kind of naivete and are juxtaposed with descriptions of men who are, essentially, hopeless. The most important symbol in the poem is the island itself, Maria Madre, which Ríos refers to as "Island of the Three Marias." Mother Mary is the mother of Jesus Christ.

Historical Context

Ríos frequently draws upon real places, people, and events in creating his fabular poems, but he injects his writing with a sense of the fantastic and strange. Critics often mention Ríos' affinity with the magical realist writers of Latin America such as Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Manuel Puig to name but a few who have helped to popularize Latin-American fiction in the last thirty years. A term with a long and complicated history, magic realism, when used to describe literature, refers to a mixture of familiarity and strangeness. Critics often describe Latin-American magic realism as an attempt to liberate the facts and things that stories describe from historical reality and to place them in a setting that more closely resembles that of a fairy tale, where characters and plot take on allegorical and mythical meaning. Márquez, a Colombian who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982, is often cited as the central figure of this style of writing. Propelled by the popularity of magic realists of the 1960s and 70s, and helped by the booming population of Hispanics in the United States in the 1980s and 90s, Mexican-American writers produced a raft of novels, poems, short stories, and essays which met with both critical and popular success. Chicano and Chi-cana writers such as Ríos, Ron Arias, Juan Felipe Herrera, Francisco X. Alarcon, Ray Gonzales, Rudolpho Anaya, Lucha Corpi, Sandra Cisneros, and Alma Luz Villanueva all give voices to the Mexican-American experience and validate the important contributions of Mexican culture to the United States.

In the early 1980s when "Island of the Three Marias" was published, Ronald Reagan was President of the United States and his administration was heavily involved in attempting to alter the political direction ofCentral America. One of Reagan's first acts after assuming office was to suspend economic aid to Nicaragua, claiming that the Sandinista government under Daniel Ortega was a puppet state of Cuba and the Soviet Union and that a communist country to the south of theUnited States threatened national security. Reagan authorized the CIA to help rebel forces overthrow the Nicaraguan government. During the mid-1980s, in violation of the Boland Amendment passed by Congress which prohibited CIA activity in helping the Contras, the CIA continued to interfere in the domestic affairs ofNicaragua. After American pilot Eugene Hasenfus was shot down on a covert mission overNicaragua and confessed to his spying activities, the Iran-Contra Affair began to unfold. During a lengthy process which included televised House and Senate committee hearings and a presidential commission investigation, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, a former marine and consultant to the White House National Security Council, testified that he had helped to divert funds from thirty-eight million dollars in Iranian arm sales to the "freedom fighters" inNicaragua in 1985. North was dismissed from his White House National Security Council position and national security adviser John Poindexter resigned his post. Reagan, though admonished by a bi-partisan House investigation committee for letting these events happen under his watch, was never indicted.

Critical Overview

"Island of the Three Marias" appears in *Five Indiscretions.* Although the poem itself hasn't received much critical attention, a few publications reviewed the collection. José David Saldívar writes that "most of the poems achieve a level of excellence not far below the peak moments in his earlier poetry." Lawrence Joseph notes that *"Five Indiscretions* displays the breadth and richness of the American language□a language which requires and will require complex techniques." Rochelle Ratner claims that Ríos "offers the insights into the lives of women seldom found in the work of a male writer." Adrián Pérez Melgosa praises the book, writing that *"[Five Indiscretions]* traces a genealogy of the seemingly capricious or irrational behavior of human beings by exploring how this behavior develops as a result of the experiences each person goes through in the secrecy of his or her most intimate moments.... [The poems] focus on processes of discovery, of learning from the experiences and stories of people, a learning that is not calculated according to a goal that has to be achieved but that is driven by a mixture of desire and chance." Melgosa claims that "No Chicano poet writing today is a more exquisite□a more fastidiously deliberate□technician than Ríos. His poetry is always lavishly textured."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

A widely published poet and fiction writer, Semansky teaches literature atPortland Community College. In the following essay, Semansky examines how "Island of the ThreeMarias" explores non-Christian ideas of suffering and martyrdom.

"Island of the Three Marias" is a mysterious poem resonant with Christian imagery and symbolism. It is effective because it leaves out more than it says. Ríos plays with prominent Judeo-Christian ideas about redemption and suffering, using theIsland of the Three Marias, home to a Mexican federal prison, as his setting, but he gives the poem its air of mystery, of magic, by leaving much to the reader's imagination.

As a poet who mines the real world of places, things, and events for stories he can imbue with an otherworldly feel and mythic significance, Ríos belongs to that group of writers sometimes referred to as magical realists. Taking their lead from Latin American writers Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges, magical realists seek the extraordinary in the mundane, find the fantastic in the everyday. For example, "On January 5, 1984, El Santo the Wrestler Died, Possibly," a poem included in *Five Indiscretions,* the collection in which "Island of the Three Marias" appears, concerns the funeral of a famous wrestler named *El Santo* (the Saint). Ríos takes the event of the wrestler's death and creates a surreal landscape in which the pallbearers all wear sequined masks in honor of their dead friend. Weaving mourners' superstitions about the dead into the fabric of his story, Ríos uses the idea that the dead can hear what the living say about them as a means to imagine the wrestler's past, how he came to be the feared yet loved person he was. In "Island of the Three Marias," Ríos imagines the lives of men who are part of the Islas Marias Federal Prison. This isn't literal reportage; by imagining what happens in a little-known real place, Ríos can create a dreamworld far more strange than one made up about a place with no basis in physical reality. It is precisely the familiarity of the descriptions that give the poem its mysterious atmosphere. Ríos critic Adrián Pérez Melgosa notes that the poet creates beauty out of conflict by "convert[ing] the day-to-day lives of individuals living on the borderlines created between cultures, languages, genders, and geographies into lyric sites where fate dances hand in hand with political resistance, and magic becomes the origin of common sense."

The first borderline that Ríos negotiates in transforming this prison island into a magical place is the one between imagination and reality. Rather than naming the poem "The Maria Islands" (the actual geographic name of the islands), Ríos calls it "Island of the Three Marias," echoing the structure of the holy trinity. In Christian theology, the holy trinity refers to the doctrine that God exists as three persons□Father, Son, and Holy Spirit□who are united in one substance or being. "Island of the Three Marias" suggests, then, that three entities reside in one place. Ríos takes the three islands□ named after the three biblical Mary's (the Virgin Mary, Maria Cleophas, Maria Magdalene)□and compresses them into one. InLatin America, a country heavily influenced by the Roman Catholic Church, the image of Mary is revered as much if not more than the image of Christ himself. The shift from calling Jesus' mother the Virgin Mary to calling her the

Mother of God occurred around the second century and primarily was a way of emphasizing the divinity of Christ himself. InMexico, it is Mary's status as mother that is so pronounced. It is telling□although the poem does not tell readers□that the island that houses the prison is Maria Madre (Mother Mary). Rather than describing the place itself, Ríos describes the men who live on the island, emphasizing that a place is more than simply a geographic entry; it also includes the people who live there and the way that the place is expressed in their behavior.

Faustino is the first person named in the poem. The second stanza presents him as a hapless sort, whose life is all suffering.

There are really four islands here But the others are simply ignored. No one has thought to ask why, Not Faustino, his wife, the children The others, or even these white nuns Not in a Christian place, prison islands Inherited from the lepers who decomposed. On this particular island the family makes A living, and this is their punishment. A burden placed in the hands of Faustino The poor man who kills.

He is presented as one of the people on the island who has grown inured to curiosity about life outside the island. The details Ríos uses to describe Faustino underscore his normality. He has a wife and a family, and they suffer to make ends meet, "this is their punishment." Ríos depicts Faustino as an everyman whose life, perhaps, hasn't turned out the way he thought it would. Readers do not, however, know Faustino's status on the island. The ambiguity of the last two lines suggests that he could be either a convict (i.e., Faustino is "the poor man who kills") or a prison guard (Faustino's burden is guarding "the poor man who kills.") To understand how a convict's family can make a living, it's important to know that Islas Marias Federal Prison is unique in that prisoners live and work in community settings and, in some cases, are allowed to bring their families to live with them. Whether he is a convict or a guard, Faustino is drawn as a sympathetic and long-suffering character in a non-Christian place. It's ironic that Faustino's name in Latin means "fortunate."

The second man described is no doubt a convict. Like Faustino, he also suffers on the island: his emotional and mental torment is salved only by a "needle in his leg," most likely medication. His disabilities prevent him from establishing relationships with women. But Faustino, exercising authority and compassion, arranges for the young man to sleep with Mrs. Marez. This is a decidedly different kind of compassion than might be exercised by someone of conventional Christian faith. Also in contradiction to Christianity is the young man's idea of truth. For Christians, the truth is that Jesus Christ died for humanity's sins and that it is only through him that one can be saved; for the young man, however, it is "dreaming / to leave this place to do again / what made his father proud / who, carefully, had shown him how."

The description of the last man, "the man in the suit," suggests that he is an administrator for the prison. Abandoned by his wife, who was ashamed of him, the man suffers from his own arrogance and inability to be someone other than the uptight pretender he has become, "the one / too formal for this frivolous place," the one who takes the name "Fresco Peach" (fresh peach) because "it reminded him of something /

American western." His suffering has led to self-loathing and resignation about the future as evidenced in the last two lines of the poem.

All of these men's sufferings, compassions, hopes, and dreams are described in very secular ways. The descriptions of their lives are juxtaposed with the description of the nuns, who are innocent and "without scars"; and unlike the men who have suffered in their relationships with women, the nuns are described as "women who will not be women here," precisely because they will not have romantic relationships. Their appearance in the poem symbolically underlines the idea of the island as a prison of desire where the religious and the secular suffer alike. The recurring symbol "white" in the three quatrains further highlights distinctions between the men and the nuns. The nuns are "in groups," whereas the men are always alone. The nuns' whiteness, suggestive not only of their goodness but of their skin color as well, contrasts with the brown-skinned Mexicans on the island.

"Island of the Three Marias" is not a description of good versus evil or even a comment on the silliness of missionaries on a prison island. By describing the suffering of three men and the hopes of the nuns to bring religion to their lives, Ríos is saying something deeper about human nature: that is, suffering, whether it be in the name of faith or as a result of an act over which humans may or may not have control, is the lot of human beings. For Christians, martyrs are those who suffered and died for their belief in Christ. For those in the secular world, martyrs might be those who died for a particular belief or cause, for example, the Irish Republican Army's Bobby Sands, who died during a lengthy hunger strike protesting Great Britain's rule ofNorthern Ireland. But what kind of martyrs can prisoners be, who have broken society's laws and who are meant to suffer to atone for their transgressions? Ríos seems to suggest that belief isn't a necessary criterion for martyrdom. The only thing necessary is being human. He suggests that human desire itself is often inscrutable and that men, especially, suffer for their desires.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Mowery has written extensively for the Gale Group. In the following essay, he considers the existential philosophy present in Ríos' poem "Island of the ThreeMarias."

The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda once said, "Our duty, then, as we understand it, is to express what is unheard of." By this he meant that the poet's task is to investigate, examine, and explore the world from new and different angles. Alberto Ríos used this quotation as the epigraph for his first book, *Whispering to Fool the Wind* (1982). By doing so, he has adopted it as his writing philosophy. The consequence of this for him is that he must come to grips with the fact that some of the characters he will reveal will not be the beautiful people, but rather they will be the down-trodden or the unsavory members of society. The editors of the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* have remarked that Alberto Ríos populates his writings with "grotesques," people who are by their very nature unappealing while at the same time interesting, haunting characters. These same editors also say that Ríos' careful and sympathetic characterizations of these kinds of people make his readers "accept and take friendly pleasure" in them.

An interesting example of this is the character Madre Sophía in Ríos' short story "Eyes Like They Say the Devil Has." A young boy, the narrator, is taken by his mother to see Sophía to get his fortune told. She is described in various unflattering ways. As she enters the room the boy says her head is "like a loose jar top on plum jam." Later, he says her head looks "fake." As she sits reading his fortune, her ample bosoms seems to jump out at him and he describes them as "horse nuzzles." Despite these unflattering descriptions and the boy's expressed fear of her, the reader develops a sympathetic feeling about the fortune teller.

Even though the characters in the poem "Island of the Three Marias" are unsavory, they are sympathetic characters whose plight is understandable because their behaviors are often similar to those experienced by many people. Readers do not come away from this poem with any deeply felt rejection of the characters. But though they might be willing to forgive bad behavior, they are not likely to forget the serious consequences of those acts.

Ríos' use of contrasts in his poem reflects his family background. He was born in Arizona, his father was from southern Mexico, and his mother was fromEngland. He once remarked that his family life gave him a "language-rich, story-fat upbringing." The combination of these cultural heritages, which heightened his perception of society, and his linguistic background helped him define his writer's voice. His language is clear, crisp, and direct; it is the language of the people who populate his poetry and fiction.

The poem is divided into three main parts, each with two stanzas. The sections open with a short introductory stanza of four lines that leads directly into a longer stanza that examines an individual character in detail. The longer stanzas are freely constructed without a rhyme scheme and are of varying lengths.

Ríos knew both the Mexican-American and the Mexican societies. When he looked at them, he saw an insidious disintegration of several important aspects upon which they were built. The church and the governmental institutions charged with caring for the incarcerated, either prisoners or mentally ill patients, were not meeting their responsibilities to the whole society. Additionally, he found the disintegration of strong personal value structures to be as threatening to society as was each of these failing institutions. In his poem, Ríos shows these parts of society combined in a negative synergy of destruction that none of them seems capable of nor interested in reversing. The nuns and the government, which oversees "the man in the suit," are just as responsible for the deterioration of personal morality as Faustino, the youth in the second set and the man in the third set are. The wife who would not visit her husband in the institution is as complicit in creating his mental instability as is the institution that keeps him "in the suit." Their combined failure to accept responsibility is the chief cause of the disintegration of the society that is represented in the poem. Ríos indicates that the interconnected responsibility of individual behavior and corporate behavior is necessary for a strong society.

In Latin America, the roles of men and women are much more rigidly established than they are in mainstream society in theUnited States. The Latino man is often the dominant force in a relationship with the woman as the submissive one. Despite the fact that these roles are changing, deep seated expectations still exist. Women are expected to be the care-givers and the nurturing members of society. The women in the poem are the nuns, representing the Roman Catholic Church, the whore in the second set, representing the loss of personal morality, and the woman who does not come to the island in the third set, representing the institution of marriage. Each stands for a specific facet of the society that Ríos believes is failing to meet its responsibility.

These women seem selfish and unconcerned about the people they meet. The nuns, who are expected to be compassionate and involved with the prisoners on the island, "will be leaving soon without scars." The internal and/or emotional scars they hope to avoid come from ministering to those in need. Rather than serving those who need them, they are more interested in getting away as fast as they can.

Ríos uses colors symbolically to indicate the nuns' declining role in the service to the Church. He calls the nuns "pale," indicating that they lack the conviction and purpose that is expected from representatives of the Catholic Church. Their paleness stands in stark contrast to the black and white habits often worn by nuns, black and white indicating the strong contrasts between right and wrong, truth and falsehood.

Their habits are also "frayed," another symbol of their declining stature. "The white nuns not in a Christian place" are in such a place of their own making. Their failure to maintain a strong position in the life of the Church's ministry is their own creation. They "will not be women" on the island who meet the expectations of nurturing and comforting representatives of the Church. They also "will not be women" who meet the physical needs of the men on theIsland.

The striking contrast between the nuns and Mrs. Marez is not as great as it might seem. In both cases, the women are located in a "physical moment." The physicality for Mrs. Marez is her sexual perfidy, allowing herself to be "loaned" for the purpose of satisfying someone else's sexual needs. The nuns' "physical moment" is likened to "Easter lilies," flowers with religious meaning, but they are static, potted emblems. Since the nuns "will not be women here" they are seen only as the visual image of the lily. But these women have abdicated their personal responsibility for their own behavior. The nuns fail to provide comfort to the prisoners; the whore fails to protect herself but offers the men a false comfort instead.

The failure of individual responsibility also exists in the role the wives play in the lives of their husbands. In the second and third sets, the wife is associated with uncomfortable feelings. In the third set, at line 45, the wife "suffered from the embarrassment of marriage" to a man who is inside an institution. She displays the same attitude as the nuns from stanza one by wanting to be "somewhere else" and "without scars." In her refusal to become involved with her husband, she takes one more step: she does not come to the "frivolous place." Just as the nuns have abdicated their role as spiritual comforter, the wife abdicates her role as emotional comforter to her husband.

The role of the wife in stanza four is figurative. Here the man seeks to soothe his hurt feelings from being laughed at by "those around him." He finds solace in drugs, which, from the needle in his leg "through his pants," calm the "pain he called wife." Ironically, the man personifies his pain and discomfort as a wife, turning the expected role of comforter into a pain-giving role.

Since the Latin-American man is very often the dominant person in a relationship between a man and a woman, he expects to be taken care of and comforted by the woman. The man then is a "taker" not a "giver." The first man in the poem is Faustino, Little Faust. In the well-known story by Goethe, Faust sells his soul to the Devil in exchange for earthly gratification. But by the end of the tale he loses everything. In Ríos's poem, Faustino is "the poor man who kills" and is sent to the island where he serves his punishment and where his family also lives and serves "their punishment." In this way, the family lives out the biblical lesson that the sins of the father are visited upon the son.

Later, Faustino "lends" the woman, Mrs. Marez, to the drug-taking youth to satisfy the youth's sexual needs. The youth has left a place where he could not have sexual contact with a woman, and now he is in a place where he could have contact but does not. As a result of his sexual ineptitude, he becomes the object of laughter "from the mouths of those around him." Because of his inability to secure sexual release, he seeks Faustino's help. The youth tries to rid himself of the echoing laughter by making "soft noises," the muted begging for Faustino's aid in acquiring the services of Mrs. Marez. In an ironic perversion of the polite ritual of saying thanks to someone, the youth thanks Faustino for the woman, and then calls the woman a "whore" even though she has given him the sexual gratification he desired.

Ríos uses white as a transition color into the last set, the sterile, cold white of government institutions and the detached and uninvolved "white nuns" from stanza two. "The man in the suit" from line 43 is a ward of the government and the institution where he is housed. Ríos shows the unsympathetic nature of the government through "the boys who were everywhere smiling at him." The man tries to hide from these people by inventing a name, "Fresco Peach," which he will not tell "to a woman." His emotional walls are as confining as the walls of the institution where he stays. He is isolated from his wife by his walls and by his wife's walls of embarrassment. In the last lines, he makes a final recognition of himself and his situation saying, "A man is ugly." With this acceptance of his condition, he "stops running." This man from the "frivolous place" acknowledges and accepts his status. Once that has been done, he no longer needs to run away from anything.

In the society in this poem, Ríos connects individual members with corporate members, demonstrating that even the slightest shortcoming has broad consequences for the whole community. No matter how insignificant a behavior pattern is, others will share in the fallout. Individual failures by themselves may seem less threatening and thereby more acceptable, but they are nonetheless devastating to the society as a whole. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre said it best when he wrote that it is necessary "to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him. And when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men." Thus the interconnectedness Ríos exposes in his poem is a phenomenon that everyone must recognize or else suffer the consequences.

Source: Carl Mowery, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

TheAcademy of American Poets sponsors a page on Ríos at http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=51.

Arizona State Universities online magazine carries a story on Ríos at http://researchmag. asu.edu/articles/alphabet.html. Ríos teaches atArizona State University.

Ríos' poem "Chileñno Boys" from *Five Indiscretions* has been set to reggae music by David Broza for CBS Records.

Las Islas Marias, a Mexican movie about a revolutionary fighter who ends up in Las Islas Marias was released in 1951. It is in Spanish and stars Pedro Infante and Tito Junco.

Topics for Further Study

In a team of at least two other students, research the history of penal colonies. Then, assuming that your group will be responsible for founding a new penal colony, draw up a document detailing how you would govern it. Back up any policies or rules you might have with reasons.

What Do I Read Next?

Ríos' collection of stories, *The Iguana Killer: Twelve Stories of the Heart,* published in 1984, is considered by some critics to be a classic of Chicano literature.

Ríos' first collection, *Whispering to Fool the Wind,* is the poet's first full-length collection of poems. It won the Walt Whitman Prize of the Poetry Society of America in 1982. Readers can see in these poems the style that Ríos would develop in later collections.

In 1995, Cambridge University Press published Rafael Perez-Torres' study *Movements in Chicano Poetry.* This book challenges the perception that all Chicano poetry deals with the same subject matter and in a similar manner.

Beyond Bounds: Cross-Cultural Essays on Anglo, American Indian, and Chicano Literature, a 1996 anthology edited by Alberto Franklin Gish, examines the inter-relationships of literature by these three groups.

Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera's 1972 book *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican-Americans* offers a progressive historical reading of Mexican migration into theUnited States.

Further Study

Lopez, Tiffany Ana, ed., *Growing Up Chicana/o,* Avon Books, 1995.

A collection of coming-of-age stories in America from Chicana/o writers such as Rudolfo Anaya, Denise Chavez, Alberto Alvaro Ríos, Marta Salinas, Gary Soto, and others. These stories celebrate the tremendous diversity of Chicana/o life through the universal themes of boundaries, family, education, and rites of passage.

Martinez, Julio A., and Francisco A. Lomeli, eds., *Chicano Literature,* Greenwood Publishing Group, 1985.

The book is arranged alphabetically with comprehensive coverage of the individual authors' lives and examination of their works by more than forty critics of Chicano literature. The selected bibliography provides access both to the authors' works and to secondary sources.

Ríos, Alberto, *Capirotada: ANogales Memoir,* University of New Mexico Press, 1999.

Ríos' memoir of his childhood in Nogales, Arizona, andNogales, Mexico, is well worth reading. He weaves together memories of family and friends to create a vivid portrait of growing up Chicano in the 1950s.

Soto,Gary, ed., *Pieces of the Heart: New Chicano Fiction,* Chronicle Books, 1993.

Introduced by Soto, this collection of Chicano fiction includes stories from well-known writers such as Sandra Cisneros, Helena Viramontes, Alberto Ríos, and Dagoberto Gilb.

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Saldívar, José David, "Alberto Alvaro Ríos" in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* edited by Francisco A. Lomeli and Carl R. Shirley, Vol. 122: Chicano Writers: Second Series: Gale Research, 1992, pp. 20-24.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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