It's like This Study Guide

It's like This by Stephen Dobyns

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

□It's like This,□ originally published in 1980 (and collected in 1994 in *Velocities: New and Selected Poems, 1966-1992*), is a not-so-pleasant look into the not-so-inspiring life of some undefined everyman. Even if it is taken on a metaphoric level, the outlook as espoused by Stephen Dobyns's poem is not good. There is existential angst lingering here, to which almost everyone can relate at various times in a lifetime□those moments when everything seems to be going wrong or, worse yet, when nothing seems to be happening or, even worse than that□as in this poem□when something is going on but it is difficult to express it and no one else seems to care.

□It's like This□ is a philosophical poem that might have been written to frighten people into waking up from the stupor that a modern, mechanized existence can induce. It is not clear if the nondescript protagonist of this poem even knows who he is. Instead, he seems to be trying to become what he thinks other people want him to be. His only solace appears to come at nighttime, when he sinks into the nothingness of sleep.

Dobyns's poems have been studied and applauded by literary critics, other poets, and scholars. He is an award-winning writer, whose language and style are down to earth and whose subject matter is easily understood. He is a philosopher and writer, but his topics are not hidden behind abstract thoughts. □It's like This,□ for example, can be read by anyone and from whatever philosophical stance, and it can be used as a meditation. As Dobyns often does, in this poem he opens his soul and invites his readers to take a peek inside. It is as if he is saying, through this poem: This is how one man's life is going. Then, after one reads the poem, it seems that Dobyns might be encouraging other people to ask themselves: How is my life going in comparison?

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1941

Stephen Dobyns is an award-winning poet and the author of several mystery novels and one collection of short stories and another of essays. Critics tend to say that his writing leans toward the dark side, but most also admit that Dobyns has an incisive wit and sense of humor. He is known for writing about everyday events in the lives of everyday people in an everyday vernacular. It has also been said that he tackles his material with courage, which, in the end, produces writing that moves his audience.

Dobyns was born in Orange, New Jersey, on February 19, 1941. His father was a minister. He attended Shimer College in Illinois, later transferring to Wayne State University in Detroit, where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1964. Three years later, Dobyns earned a master of fine arts degree from the University of Iowa. After gaining his master's, he taught for a short while but changed his career focus in 1971 when he became a reporter for the *Detroit News*. Throughout the years, he has been a visiting teacher at several colleges, such as Boston University, the University of Iowa, the University of New Hampshire, Goddard College, and Warren Wilson College; he has also been a professor of creative writing at Syracuse University. For most of his life, however, his attention has always been centered on writing.

Poetry is his main love, Dobyns has stated in various interviews. *Concurring Beasts* (1972) was his first published collection of poems, and it was the 1972 Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets. Other works that have earned awards are *Black Dog, Red Dog* (1984), which was a winner in the National Poetry Series, and *Cemetery Nights* (1987), which won a Melville Cane Award. Dobyns has twelve poetry collections to his name, including *Mystery, So Long* (2005). Before being collected in book form, many of Dobyns's poems are often first published in prestigious literary magazines and journals, such as the *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, the *New Yorker*, *Antaeus*, *Iowa Review*, *Paris Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Since most of his poetry lacks a traditional form, his poems fall into the categories of free verse and narrative poetry. Dobyns has been referred to as one of the best narrative poets in the United States.

In fiction writing, Dobyns is even more prolific, with twenty books to his credit. His mystery novels, with the recurring character Charlie Bradshaw, come under the series title of the *Saratoga* stories. Detective Bradshaw has been described as having visible flaws, which means that he is more human than many other stereotypical fictional detectives. The stories are set in Saratoga Springs, New York, where the racetrack typically serves as background. Dobyns's latest mystery in this series is *Saratoga Strongbox*, published in 1998.

Dobyns's other novels include *Church of the Dead Girls* (1997) and *Boy in the Water* (1998). In 2000, he published his first collection of short stories, *Eating Naked*.

Plot Summary

Stanzas 1 and 2

□It's like This□ begins by introducing what the speaker of this poem refers to as □the man.□ He □rises from bed□ and begins his day, not of his own free will but by a cord that is wound around his neck and is pulled □tighter and tighter□ until the man is disturbed enough by it that he awakens. The speaker makes no comment concerning how the man feels about this situation. He does not mention any anxiety or frustration or anger. The man in the poem merely seems to accept the cord's existence as something he has to tolerate without complaint, as if it is a part of him.

In the second stanza, the man □greets his family,□ but there is no sense of his acknowledging them or of their acknowledging him. The speaker mentions the family only in relationship to the man's □looking for himself in their eyes.□ This man, it seems, does not have an identity of his own. He looks into the eyes of his family to find himself. Although he might not know who he is, he does know what he is not. The speaker states that the man cannot find himself in his family's eyes when he looks into them. Instead, he sees men who are shorter or taller than he is. The man also has a sense of his own inner life, because when he looks into the eyes of the members of his family, he also sees □men with / different degrees of anger or love.□ Of course, he would not recognize this if he were not in touch with his own emotions.

This is an ordinary man who does ordinary things, like waking and sleeping, going to movies, and catching a bus. But he is not ordinary in other ways. People try to define him, but the speaker points out that these people never quite get it right. They do not know him, no matter how much they think they do. This is evident when the man states that all he sees when he looks into the eyes of other people is □the kind of men / that people who hardly know him often mistake / for him.□ In other words, all he sees are stereotypes of himself. No one knows his inner self. It is not clear whether the man knows himself much better than his family or friends know him. If he did, why would he be looking for himself in someone else's eyes? Or is it that he is looking for himself in their eyes to discover whether they know him? Maybe he does know himself but just cannot find his definition of himself in the people around him.

Stanza 3

The third stanza starts off with a concrete statement: □He has a job.□ But quickly following this comment is an abstraction. The concrete job that this man has □could be at a bank,□ the speaker states. This puts the definition of the man back into fuzzy territory and becomes a reflection of the first two stanzas, leaving the reader to question: Does this man have a job or not? Does he know himself or not? Another possibility is that the speaker is merely offering all the options of this man, to give the impression that the speaker is not talking about one man but about a philosophical

everyman. In other words, the speaker might be meaning to say, *This could be any man, one who might have a job working at a bank or in a library or digging a ditch*.

The speaker then goes on to offer something very mysterious about this man. This man, whoever he is and wherever he works and whether or not he is a concrete someone or an abstract everyone, has a not-so-clear vision. It □hovers at the corner of his eye.□ This man does not really see it, but he senses it is there, □like a name he is trying to remember.□ The speaker further describes this thing that the man cannot quite bring into focus. He uses different senses to grasp it. If it is a name he cannot remember, then it is something intangible. If it is □a touch on the shoulder,□ then it relates to a sensual experience. If it is □as if someone were about to embrace him,□ it is not only sensual but could even be joyful, especially if it was □a woman in a blue dress.□ This at first arouses a sense of pleasure. Blue is the color of the sky and could represent openness. But then the speaker adds that this woman is someone the man □has never met.□ That throws the reader back into ambiguity again. The woman is a stranger wanting to offer a hug, and this could be pleasant, or it could be threatening. Next, the speaker adds another phrase that turns the feeling in yet another direction. Not only is this woman a stranger, she is also someone the man will □never meet again.□ This adds mystery to the equation and heightens the sensuality; it also infuses the stanza with a sense of isolation and loneliness.

The speaker then informs the reader that the kind of vision the man is experiencing, this thing that is just out of focus, is the whole purpose of the man's □labor.□ Bringing the fuzzy image into focus is the whole meaning of the day and the man's effort. But the man never seems to grasp the thing fully. □He can almost describe it,□ but that is as close as he gets. It is as difficult to seize, the speaker states, as □a burning field with smoke swirling around it.□

Stanzas 4 and 5

In the fourth stanza, the man returns home from his day on the job. Again he □studies the eyes of his family.□ He does this to see if he should change or has changed. Who, he wonders as he stares into their eyes, should he be tonight? He wants to tell his family that he made a discovery that day, that he felt as if he were standing □on the brink of something amazing.□ But he does not say this. He cannot say this, perhaps because it would make no sense to them or perhaps because it makes no sense to him. He cannot tell them, because he has not fully understood it himself. Because he does not say anything, they look at him as if he were nothing. They walk □around him / as if he were a stick leaning against a wall.□ He is inanimate to them, dead, useless.

Then, as darkness falls again, the same cord that appeared in the first stanza reappears in the last stanza. The cord is still wrapped around his neck and now □draws him to bed.□ This time an emotion is mentioned, but it is not what readers might have expected. Instead of being angry about being forced into bed by a cord wrapped around his neck, the man is □consoled.□ He likes the □coolness of sheets, pressure / of blankets.□ This coolness runs in opposition to the heat of the □burning field□ that the

man imagined when he was attempting to understand that □something,□ that vision that had eluded him earlier in the day. But it is the coolness that comforts him. The man goes to bed and turns not to his wife but rather to □the wall.□ He is alone in his own world, separated from his family and the world. Instead of embracing his wife, he stares at a blank wall. □And as water / drains from a sink so his daily mind slips from him.□ His experiences of the day wash away. Seemingly, no residue of the past remains. His memories no longer cling to him.

Sleep comes to him □like a woman in a blue dress.□ This could imply that his sleep is also a stranger. His sleep might be pleasant, or it might not. The implications of relating his sleep to the strange woman are not clear, but the poem seems to indicate that even his sleep does not belong to him. It will come like a stranger and leave like a stranger. The speaker personalizes the darkness, however. It □puts its arms around him, embracing him,□ much like the woman had, except that the darkness talks to him. □Be true to me, it says, each night you belong to me more.□ It is the darkness that wants the man, more so than the woman or the man's family. Darkness appears to know the man better than anyone knows him. The darkness is the only place that the man finds comfort. □I lift you up and wrap you within me,□ the darkness tells him, much as a lover might say.

Themes

Hopelessness

That the man in Dobyns's poem □It's like This□ is comforted by the darkness and that the speaker of the poem likens the same darkness to a sensual embrace create a sense of hopelessness in this poem. If darkness is the only thing that soothes this man, he is forever lost in an unreal world where there is no light. If there is light in his dreams, it is only his imagination playing tricks on him, just as the darkness pretends to be a lover. A soul in darkness is not a positive image. It does not translate as someone who is inspired.

Another indicator of hopelessness is that the man goes out each day and tries to focus on what appears to be something that cannot be put into focus. Throughout his day, the man runs into situations that would totally frustrate most people. No one seems to know who he really is, his family treats him like a nobody, his job is an ambiguous vocation, and the only person who pays much attention to him is a woman whom he will never see again. Moreover, the man is jerked around by a rope that is tightly wrapped around his neck. It yanks him out of his sleep and stays wrapped around his neck all day, waiting for the night so it can jerk him to bed. It seems that the only place the man finds comfort is in the darkness and in his sleep, but, still, that same rope will not allow him to remain there. As soon as the man falls into a deep sleep, the rope wrenches him out of his dreams again.

Isolation

It is not clear whether the man truly knows or understands who he is, but it is stated definitively that no one around him knows him. It is hard to tell if the man is searching into their eyes to find out how much they can see of him or if he is looking to them to tell him who he is. It is obvious, however, that the man is alone. His family sees him as someone he himself does not recognize. His friends see him as someone he is not. The only person or thing that attempts to embrace him is a stranger and a personification of the darkness. The man is not just a stick to his family but also a stick that they have leaned against the wall. He is of no use to them. When he tries to tell them who he is and what he has experienced, he cannot find the language to convey his messages. He is confined to his own world. Finally, when he goes to bed, the only place where he finds any sense of belonging, he turns his body toward a wall. It is as if he were a blank, a nothing that is self-enclosed. He lives in a world in which he has no essence. The thing that he tries to focus on is fuzzy and ambiguous, and it is very much like him. He is isolated because he has no language with which to communicate; he has no image that anyone can grasp. He cannot be named.

Death

Beneath the surface of Dobyns's poem is a sense of death. Death is the darkness that soothes the man in this poem. Life, on the other hand, is the rope around his neck. But a rope around the neck implies death by hanging. Even in the concept of life there is death. Life is a completely baffling experience for the man; he cannot grasp its meaning. He has difficulties playing out its games. Everything about life appears absurd or foreign to him. He tries his best but always comes up short, as if he did not exist. The closest he comes to making contact with life is with a stranger who will shortly disappear. The darkness is the only place where the man feels any comfort. That darkness, which can be interpreted as death, wants to embrace him and pull him up and wrap itself around him until the man is within the darkness forever. It would be difficult to interpret this passage as meaning anything less than that the man wants to die.

Existence

What is existence? this poem seems to be asking. Is it one's identity? If so, what does that mean? What is identity if everyone sees a person as someone that he or she is not? Should one conform to what others think, even if those definitions do not in any way match one's self-definition? Why do those definitions differ so widely?

These are a few of the basic questions about existence that this poem seems to be asking. Is existence language? What happens when one tries to speak but becomes so frustrated in trying to explain oneself that nothing comes out? Try as one might to grasp the meaning of life, it is always somewhere out of reach. The closest the man in the poem comes to touching something real in this life is a chance meeting with a stranger who will shortly leave. The man in this poem tries many different ways to relate to existence or to understand it, but it constantly eludes him. It becomes, in the end, not much more than waking up in a world in which no one knows him and no one really cares. Even if he did figure it all out, darkness (death) will eventually call him, and everything or anything that he has claimed as his existence will be washed, like water, down the drain.

Style

Sound

Dobyns has stated that one of the effects that he enjoys in writing poetry is the sound of the words that come together—not only the words, he has said, but even the sound of the individual syllables, consonants, and vowels. With this in mind, readers might want to pay attention to the sound of this poem. For example, in the first line, the words "morning" and "man" both begin with the letter *m*. The words "bed" and "because" both begin with the letter *b*. This is alliteration, the repetition of the same initial consonant in a string of words. The poet purposely creates a specific sound to which he is drawn. There is also the repetition of the word "cord" in the second and third lines, another purposeful act of writing, which adds emphasis to that word. Then, too, there is the repetition of the word "tighter" in the last line of the first stanza.

In the next stanza, there is more alliteration. Three words begin with the letter *h* in the first line: "he," "him," and "himself." The word "men" is repeated in the second line. In the third line of the second stanza, the phrase "different degrees" is another example of alliteration, as is the phrase "smoke swirling" in the second to last line in stanza 3. In the second line of the fifth stanza is the phrase "consoled by the coolness." In the fifth stanza, there is a long series of the sound of *s*. It begins with the same phrase, "consoled by the coolness," and then continues to the next line with the words "blankets," "turns," and "as" in the next line. This is not technically an example of alliteration, because the similar sound does not appear at the beginning of each word; the sound nevertheless continues to be heard in close succession. The *s* sound builds up even more strongly in the next few lines: "drains from a sink so his daily mind slips," followed by "sleep rises" and "dress." Finally we have the phrase "darkness puts its arms" and the word "embracing" at the end of the third to last line, which carries the same *s* sound with a soft *c*.

The reader can also pay attention to sound by listening for rhyming. Although there are no lines ending in rhyme in this poem, there are phrases that have unexpected rhyming sounds. Such is the phrase "family to see," with the final *y* in "family" rhyming with the word "see" in the first line of the fourth stanza. This rhyme continues into the next line, where one finds "what person he should be," with "he" and "be" rhyming. More examples of the sound of *e* are also found twice in the word "evening" and once more in the word "he" that follows. Another rhyme begins at the end of that line with the word "say" and continues into the next line with the word "day," which is repeated farther into that same line. A sort of "false" rhyming appears in the last two lines of stanza 4 with the words "walks" and "wall" in the following line.

Metaphor

Metaphors are often used in literary writing. Using metaphor, the author presents the reader with a comparison between two things that at first appear to be dissimilar. In Dobyns's poem, the metaphor is extended, making up the construction of the entire poem. In other words, this poem is not really about a man who has a cord around his neck. It is not really about some man looking into the eyes of his family and having them look at him as if he were a stick. Dobyns is striving to relate a deeper meaning beneath the surface of the words of this poem. He uses the images, such as the woman in the blue dress or □something that refuses to / show itself hover[ing] at the corner of his eye,□ to try to put an abstract concept into an image that is more concrete. For example, in this poem Dobyns may be attempting to explain his philosophy about life. Instead of talking in esoteric terminology□words designed to be understood by only a few people□he creates a generic man who lives in a very strange world, to give his readers a model upon which they can build an image. In this way, Dobyns is building a bridge, so to speak, so his ideas can connect with his readers' understanding. If nothing else, readers can walk away with a feeling, if not a full comprehension of what Dobyns is talking about. The extended metaphor exudes a feeling of frustration and depression, a sense that existence on this earth is not a very easy concept to grasp. The poet has done this by telling a metaphoric story about a man with a cord wrapped around his neck.

Historical Context

The 1980s

Dobyns's poem □It's like This□ was published in 1980, the beginning of a decade that would force Americans to witness many optimistic but also numerous equally desperate events, things that could make one feel depressed, as the man in Dobyns's poem does. It was around this time that the human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV, first showed up in the United States, spreading fast, before many people understood what it was and what caused it. At the same time, people suffering from depression started using the medication Prozac. The 1980s also saw interesting positive developments. For instance, compact discs (CDs) were created, and tapes were fading out of use. Then, too, computers were beginning to be used more and more at home, instead of just at work.

Television went through major transitions at this time as well. The Cable News Network (CNN) began broadcasting news twenty-four hours a day, which was unheard of in earlier years. Previously, most people had watched a half hour to an hour of news a day at most. Another now-popular television station, Music Television, or MTV, began broadcasting. This music station grew so popular that it soon became necessary for most musical performers not only to know how to read music and play an instrument but also to learn how to project themselves in videos. MTV would eventually affect the film industry, influencing directors to make full-length movies out of short, quick shots, similar to the MTV music video setup. Another new network, Fox, was born during this decade, as was Oprah Winfrey's television show. The first handheld video system, Game Boy, now found in many American households, was developed in the 1980s.

The decade began with a deranged fan's tragic and fatal shooting in 1980 of the British rock star John Lennon, formerly of the Beatles. In 1981 in Great Britain, Prince Charles married Lady Diana Spencer in what seemed to be a fairy-tale wedding. Their union was not based on romance, but that did not stop the world from falling in love with the British princess. The later 1980s saw the dismantling of two icons of World War II, the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, bringing the hope of a united world.

Modernism

There are hints of the modernist influence in Dobyns's poetry. Although it is hard to define modernism in relation to poetry, in general, modernism represents a movement away from formalized vocabulary and themes to a more relaxed stance, one in which everyday objects and events are the topics and everyday language more closely related to normal speech is used. Whereas it once was a poet's custom to use gods or kings and queens as elevated models upon which to meditate in order to create a poem, in the past hundred years more personalized subjects have been explored, especially such personal topics as marital problems and depression. Some poets who emphasize

the personal realm are referred to as □confessional□ poets because they reveal their inner secrets to the public and often explore social ills as well as personal philosophies about life. There is less reliance, if any at all, on rhyme in these modern verses.

Existentialism

Besides the modernistic traits of Dobyns's writing, there is also an element of existentialist thought running through his poetry. The existentialism demonstrated in the myth of Sisyphus comes close to reflecting the underlying tone of Dobyns's poem. In this myth, Sisyphus is ordered by the gods to repeatedly roll a huge boulder up a hill and, once at the top, to let it roll back down again. Sisyphus is condemned to repeat this process over and over again. According to some existentialists, life, much like the one described in the myth, can be meaningless. Despair, as defined by some existentialists, is the feeling humans experience when they realize that nothing in this life is definite. This existence (hence the name *existentialists*) is all that humans have. There is no afterlife, no god, no reward. Human beings direct their own reality and have full freedom to choose what their lives will be like. The emphasis, in this philosophy, is to make the most of one's earthly existence, since it is all there is. Sometimes associated with this philosophy is an overall sense of gloom due to feelings of isolation, alienation, and depression. Without a belief in a god who judges good and bad or a belief in an afterlife, one might feel quite alone. Often, writers who are influenced by existential thought express these types of emotions in their work. A strong consciousness of death also influences those who believe in this philosophy.

The concept of existential thought was taken from the writings of such philosophers as Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre. The ideas that were put forth by these men were later exemplified in the writings of many playwrights and authors; among the most famous were Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Henrik Ibsen, Eugène Ionesco, and Franz Kafka, whose works were mainly published in the first half of the twentieth century.

Then, in the 1950s and 1960s, Jack Kerouac and the Beat poets adopted existentialist themes. Even though there is rarely a modern writer who is specifically referred to as an existentialist, literary critics often point out existential elements in the works of those who are categorized as postmodern poets.

Rainer Maria Rilke

In an interview in the literary magazine *Ploughshares* a few years ago, Dobyns praised the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) as one of the few poets whose writing most thoroughly exemplified great art. Rilke is remembered as one of Germany's greatest poets. His poems continue to be widely published, but one of his most read books is his *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929), in which he advises a new writer to seek his teacher not in some school but rather within himself. Rilke was much involved in his poetry with

finding spirituality. In the course of his relationship with the sculptor Auguste Rodin, Rilke's writing took on a sharp focus on objects. He wrote what some have called □thing-poems.□ Things are definite, Rilke is known to have explained, and poems must be even more definite than things. His *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1922) took a turn toward the abstract, however, as they contemplated the union of life and death. He believed that artists came closest to creating a bridge between life and death through acts of creativity. He spent his later years encouraging other artists to express themselves and to search for a higher degree of reality.

Critical Overview

Dobyns's poem □It's like This□ was published in the collection *Velocities*, which the *Booklist* reviewer Donna Seaman describes as a book that □takes us on a journey into territories both mythical and commonplace.□ *Velocities* contains material from eight previous volumes of poetry plus several new and previously unpublished poems. As Seaman points out, the title of this collection is significant because most of the poems are about movement of one sort or another. Seaman compares this movement to that of water, □which can move at many speeds and fill any space.□

In an article called □Story Tellers,□ published in the *American Poetry Review*, Louise Glück, a poet herself, analyzes Dobyns's poetry and also describes it in terms of motion, saying that his poems take □a rapid downward trajectory.□ She goes on to state that Dobyns's poetry overall is □apocalyptic□ and continues with the statement that his □poems are fierce, impatient, judgemental, wildly funny.□ Glück comments that because Dobyns writes in so many different genres and is so prolific, some poetry critics overlook his work. Just because he is prolific, she argues, does not necessarily mean that his writing stays on the surface. Glück sees it differently: □The manifold examples of Dobyns's mastery continue to appear with stubborn frequency under various numbers in the Dewey decimal system.□ If Dobyns's work is not read in the classroom as some other great contemporary poets' works are read, Glück says, it is probably because his poetry is often □too entertaining, too well written.□

Dobyns's subjects are often about depression or depressed people. This is the case in his tenth collection of poetry, *Pallbearers Envying the One Who Rides*, which many reviewers praise for the skill in writing but find the poems to be depressing. In a review for *Poetry*, for instance, the critic John Taylor says that □the poet pokes fun at everything, including love and virility.□ But Taylor goes on to describe these poems as □absorbing□ and writes that Dobyns is a □very skilled and profoundly concerned poet.□ A critic for the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, a literary magazine that has published many of Dobyns's poems, also finds his work to be depressing. However, this reviewer puts it a different way, saying that Dobyns □is darkly funny and provocative as ever.□ In the end, though, this same reviewer suggests that the readers who might fully appreciate Dobyns's poetry might be those who are likewise □depressed.□

Dobyns's tone and the themes that are found in his poetry often carry over to his works of fiction. In a review written for *Booklist*, the critic Bill Ott describes Dobyns's novel *The Church of Dead Girls* as □an unusually thoughtful psychological thriller.□ Ott points out that, even in his fiction, Dobyns □combines both his poetic and popular sides.□ Also referring to his fiction, Mary G. Szczesiul, writing for the *Library Journal*, recommends Dobyns's collection of short stories, *Eating Naked*, praising the writer's ability to write in a □natural, compelling, and convincing voice about ordinary people and people on the edge.□ Michele Leber, reviewing Dobyns's collection of short stories for *Booklist*, remarks that in taking on the genre of short fiction, Dobyns □allows a show of ingenuity, even exuberance.□ Leber liked the collection and praised Dobyns, calling this work an □accomplishment by a multitalented writer.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hart is a published author and freelance writer. In the following essay, Hart probes Dobyns's poem in search of the essence of life.

From the very first words, Dobyns's poem □It's like This□ is a commentary about life. It might take reading the entire poem to make readers realize that even the title of this poem indicates this fact. The title works as an announcer, calling the attention of its audience: Ladies and gentlemen, what you are about to hear is my take on what life is all about. The body of the poem supplies the text.

What, then, is the philosophy of this poem, or the essence of life? The answers are hidden behind every stanza, line, and sometimes even individual words. The clues are not that hard to find. For instance, the first two words of the poem provide a very important hint. They set the mood of the poem even before the reader is certain of the subject matter and theme. Dobyns's poem begins with the words □Each morning.□ These two words, as simple as they seem at first, bring the myth of Sisyphus to mind. This is the story of the man who must roll a huge boulder up a hill only to watch it roll back down, knowing that he must descend the hill and perform the task over and over again. □Each morning□ implies the same drudgery, for the speaker in this poem must perform the same tasks over and over again. Each morning he rises and faces the same situation. As readers will soon find out, that situation is bleak.

Next, readers learn that the man rises out of his bed each morning solely because he has a cord around his neck. The cord is invisible, so no one sees it, but its pressure upon the man's neck is real. The source of the cord is □someplace in the dark,□ and the response of the man to the cord's pulling him out of bed and into the day is dissatisfaction. He is □always dissatisfied□ by the rope because it forces him to awake. It brings the man out of the darkness into the light, and the man does not like the light. The following stanzas of the poem explain why.

The man reluctantly rises out of bed to face the day. He □greets his family,□ the people who should be the closest to him, sharing the majority of his life's experience, his emotions, and his reflections with them. But the first thing the man does is to look for □himself in their eyes.□ What does he find? He discovers that there are men in there, but they are nothing like him. Or, at best, these male images that his family holds of him are stereotypes that do not fit *his* description either physically or emotionally. They all have □different degrees of anger or love□ than the man believes that he has. There is ambiguity here, however. It is not clear whether the man's family does not know him well or rather that the man does not recognize their images as himself. In other words, has the man hidden his true identity from them? Has his family not taken the time to get to know him? Or is the man so unaware of himself that the image he sees of himself through their eyes appears so distorted that he does not recognize himself? Does he think he is better than that image? Or has he not put in the time and affection that is required for his family to see him as he wishes they would see him? This part of the poem will remain a mystery. All that readers know for sure is that, according to the man,

the image that he has of himself and the image that his family has of him do not match. For whatever reason this has come about, the outcome is not comforting. It pushes the man away from his family, creating a barrier between them. The family is living with one set of concepts, while the man is living with another. There are no bridges connecting the man to his family; a chasm lies between them. They are virtual strangers to one another. This man's family looks at him like □people who hardly know him,□ mistaking him for someone else.

In the third stanza, the man leaves his family and wanders out into the social world, where he fares not much better. He has some nondescript job, possibly □turning a piece of flat land / into a ditch,□ and the only thing that provides any sense of a spark in his life is a vague □something that refuses to / show itself.□ This is as close as the man in this poem comes to experiencing joy. This is the only part of life that excites him, but the excitement is frustrating. This □something□ always remains fuzzy and out of reach. No matter how hard the man tries to fully engage with it, no matter how much he fantasizes about it, he never fully realizes it. This image of the man trying to grasp this □something□ is another attempt to connect with life. He has trouble dealing with his family, which represents his more personal relationship with life. But even on a less intimate level, the man still cannot find a way to join the common experience of humankind. No matter where he turns, he finds himself locked in a personal closet, alone and terribly out of touch. He appears to want to be a part, however. There is an element of searching in the man. He may not know what he is searching for or how to find it, but he longs for an embrace. He wants to be recognized. When this □something□ that the man cannot fully grasp is mentioned, it is described □as if someone / were about to embrace him, a woman in a blue dress.□ The same woman is mentioned later in the poem, also embracing him, and it is one of the few places in the poem where a sense of a positive emotion is expressed. As readers will find later, however, it is a positive reaction to something that in itself may not be construed as positive.

So far, the vision of this man's take on life is rather despairing. He is reluctantly awakened, must face his family with little to show for the effort, and then go out into a world, which he cannot quite define. So he returns home. At home he once again checks out his family, hoping to determine from them who he should be. Maybe things have changed. He wants to communicate with them. He wants to express something positive, something inspired. He wants to share with them, but he does not have the language to do so. He cannot bridge the gap. The reason is that he does not even know how to talk to himself. How can he describe his life experience if he cannot quite put his finger on what life is to him? And so his family dismisses him. He is nothing to them, totally useless, and so they ignore him.

The most intimate thing in this man's life, in this whole poem, is the cord wrapped around his neck. It is always with him and is the only thing that touches him. But what is it? And what do its actions represent? Earlier, the cord was described as being invisible and attached to the darkness at one end. With these descriptions, the cord could represent something spiritual. The cord could be like an umbilical cord, attaching the man to the unknown, to someplace where he was before he was born. It could

represent the soul, for instance. But the actions of the cord are strange. The cord tightens around the man's neck and squeezes it until the man is forced to awaken in the morning. Although this is stimulating in a way, prompting the man to open his eyes and confront the day, it is not a pleasant image. A cord tightening around someone's neck is a symbol of death. The cord's having its origins in darkness also links the cord to death. To most readers, the cord would suggest a negative image, but, strangely, it is to the darkness that the man in this poem appears to most want to go. In effect, the cord, for this man, might be something positive.

To stress this point, the final stanza of the poem is the most rewarding for the man. It is here that he leaves behind his family and the world. □He turns to the wall, and as water / drains from a sink so his daily mind slips from him.□ He completely forgets about everything to do with life. And that is when the darkness beckons to him, □like a woman in a blue dress.□ It is here in his bed where he is □consoled.□ This is the only place in his life that gives him any semblance of pleasure, other than the fleeting encounter with that vague □something□ that constantly eludes him in his waking life. He is cuddled by the darkness and soothed. It is the darkness, not life, that embraces him. It is the darkness that talks to him. No one else in this poem has said a word to him. □Be true to me,□ the darkness says, as if the darkness were a lover. The reason the man must remain true to the darkness is that one day the darkness will reclaim him. □Each night,□ the darkness tells him (reflecting the words □each day□ at the beginning of the poem, when the man awakens), □you belong to me more.□ This implies that each day the man belongs to the day (to life) a little less. And with the last line, the darkness reminds the man that death is the man's final home: □until at last I lift you up and wrap you within me.□

It is in the light that the man finds dissatisfaction. He does not want to be awakened to the day. He feels alienated to what he finds in his day. He is out of focus and pushed aside there. No one knows him, and he might not even know himself in the light. Only in the dark, only in his nighttime wanderings that bring him closer and closer to death, does he find peace. Life is a struggle and a challenge, whereas darkness (which implies death) is as sensual and as comforting as a lover.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on □It's like This,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Heims is a writer and teacher working in Paris. In the following essay, Heims argues that Dobyns presents an everyman for whom the lure of death is stronger than his attachment to the routines of his life.

The opening stanza of □It's like This□ alerts the reader to the central theme of the poem, a struggle□which goes on inside □the man□ himself□between life and death. This struggle is repeated throughout the poem, represented in a series of images and situations that outline the contours of □the man's□ daily life. What is ironic about the conflict as it is presented in the poem is that the conditions of life frustrate the man and that death, as it unfolds and is fully revealed in the last stanza, is the only gratifying element in his life. Life itself offers no pleasure, but death is alluring. Within the framework of a profound crisis of the spirit, Dobyns constructs a critique of the daily life that the poem suggests most people lead, by identifying the central figure generically as □the man□ rather than as a particular person.

□Each morning the man,□ who is the victim-hero of the poem, wakes up choked. Wound tightly round his neck is an □invisible / cord leading from his neck to someplace in the dark.□ As the poem begins, there are two unknowns: the nature of the invisible cord and the dark place. As the poem unfolds, those unknowns are revealed, and the violent tension between them, which is stated in the first stanza and described and developed in the following stanzas, is resolved.

Dobyns, a novelist as well as a poet, is a storyteller. In his poetry he follows the precept of the American poet William Carlos Williams that there are no ideas except in *things*. Dobyns moves the reader away from the metaphorically vague world created by the imagery of the first stanza and fills the second stanza with concrete images of routine domestic situations. But the images arise from within the consciousness of the man. He greets his family and looks for himself in their eyes. He does not find himself there. He sees himself reflected back as someone else, as a man he might be mistaken for. He finds only other people's vague impressions of him. This feedback serves to make his sense of himself lack firmness or clarity. Dobyns is describing alienation and isolation, but not as abstract events□and he does not use abstract language. Through the concrete presentation of the man's conscious awareness of other people's perceptions of him, and because of his search for himself in them rather than in himself, Dobyns shows that the man conveys very little of himself to others and, in fact, has very little real existence either in their consciousness of him or in himself.

The sequence of the poem follows the sequence of the events of the man's day. Dobyns's account of his day traces the course of his encounter with the conflicting forces of life and death. After rising and greeting his family, he goes to work. What the work is does not matter. It could be any of a number of jobs, just as he could be any of a number of men. What is important about his job, whether he works in a bank, a library, or a construction site, is that it holds no interest for him. What does attract his attention is something that is not there: □All day something that refuses to / show itself hovers at

the corner of his eye.□ It presses against him with a mental and a physical presence, □like a name he is trying to remember, like / expecting a touch on the shoulder.□ In the context of the rejection and alienation the poem has shown, the man experiences the hint of a wished-for presence, something that will give him a sense of his own existence. The vague sensation taunting him is □as if someone / were about to embrace him.□ And then the image is no longer vague. It is no longer □someone□ but □a woman in a blue dress / whom he has never met.□

Even this apparently specific image is a chimera, an illusion, a representation of a vague and desperate longing: it is the image of a woman □he has never met□ and □would never meet again.□ It becomes both clear and impenetrable, however, when she transforms into a guide who can lead him, the image suggests, beyond a veil: □a figure at the edge / of a burning field with smoke swirling around it / like white curtains shot full of wind and light.□ Light or dark, all is blank. The woman is the emblem of something he is approaching, something he is trying to see and to know, something that can truly define him. The man does not know it, but the reader begins to sense, and the end of the poem will confirm, that the darkness to which the cord pulls him is what he vaguely perceives in the woman. Because he has not seen it or felt it clearly yet, he thinks he is seeking something hidden in life. He is mistaken. It is something outside life that is hinted at by the darkness. □It seems the purpose of each day's labor / is simply to bring this mystery to focus,□ the man thinks. Paradoxically, the emptiness and purposelessness of his life sharpen his sense of the dark mystery of his life and propel him toward it. The frustration and barrenness of his life make the darkness of death clearer to him and more alluring.

Each day brings no real breakthrough. Day's end brings the man no closer to a revelation but only back to his family and the way things were in the morning. As he had been □looking for himself in their eyes□ then, now, □When he returns home, he studies the eyes of his family to see / what person he should be that evening.□ His experience at home is marked by the same unfulfilled longing and denial that everything else about him has suggested. He cannot communicate. □He wants to say,□ Dobyns writes, not □he said.□ The man continues to live in a world where the inside of his mind sharply splits off from the world, where what he wants and what he does bear no relation to each other. Those who perceive him never realize what he has experienced.

Even to himself, what the man has to say is vague: □All day I have been listening, all day I have felt / I stood on the brink of something amazing.□ Even to himself he can describe his experience only as standing □on the brink of something amazing.□ But what that □something amazing□ is, he cannot articulate. □He says nothing.□ Without the power to □say,□ to create and to assert himself by expressing himself, the man indeed is like what his family takes him for, □a stick leaning against a wall,□ which they walk around. The images of the man and of his family's behavior toward him jointly suggest the low point in his hopeless and empty life, so devoid of meaning or contact.

In the context of his despair, the last stanza rises in the poem almost like a happy ending. □The cord around his neck,□ which the reader has learned is the man's life itself and which, we were told in the first stanza, □makes him always dissatisfied,□ now

does not. It □draws him to bed,□ where, for the first time in the poem, the man experiences something that is not dissatisfying, vague, or alienated from himself. □He is consoled by the coolness of sheets, pressure / of blankets.□ The image is tangible and familiar. Dobyns follows it with another sharp image that clearly shows the condition the man has entered: □his daily mind slips from him□ the way □water / drains from a sink.□ It is an image of cleansing and emptying. It signifies release and relief, as if the water stands for his life as well as for his □daily mind□ and draining represents the unclogging of life.

The images that follow confirm the suggestion of death. The man □turns to the wall,□ something solid, and □sleep rises before him like a woman in a blue dress.□ The mysterious and vague woman who had haunted him during the day returns fully defined as sleep. Sleep and □darkness□ are equated. The sensation represented equally by sleep, darkness, and the woman □puts its arms around him, embracing him.□ The darkness speaks to him, too, and its words represent the first instance in the poem when the split between outer and inner forces is healed and the man experiences unity. □Be true to me,□ the darkness, which is the woman in the blue dress, says. □Each night you belong to me more, / until at last I lift you up and wrap you within me.□ Death is the mystery he is drawn to, the lover who beckons to him, who, ironically, by leading him into the nonexistence of death, will lead him out of the nonexistence of his life. Only death can see him as he really is, satisfy him, and accept him completely, just as he is□unlike anyone or anything else in his life.

Source: Neil Heims, Critical Essay on □It's like This,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Go online and gather as much information as you can so you have an understanding of the basic beliefs of existentialism. Then write a paper on how Dobyns's poem might have been influenced by this philosophy, pointing out specific issues he raises that are reflected in this philosophy.

Research the current clinical responses to depression. What kinds of therapy are being used? What are the different types of depression, and whom do they affect? Are there differences in the statistical details between the genders? Does age or ethnicity or environment (where someone lives) make a difference? Write a paper about your findings.

Write a poem that is an extended metaphor. Choose a concept you want to portray and then create an image that will convey the message you want to offer to your audience. You may make your images as surreal as you want, but be sure that the images you create are consistent with your message. For instance, if your subject is a dark one, keep the images dark. If the subject is a joyful one, make sure your metaphor expresses that feeling.

Chose five people and ask them to read Dobyns's poem. Give them time to digest the meaning of the poem and then ask them either to tell you or to write an essay about this poem's subject. Next, write a paper about your findings, discussing the similarities in the five people's interpretations. Also compare their evaluations with your own understanding of the poem.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Mount Saint Helens volcano erupts, causing loss of life and sending up thick black clouds of ash that darken the skies in the Pacific Northwest. This is the largest volcanic explosion ever in the United States.

Today: A tidal wave sweeps over wide-ranging coastlines from Indonesia to Africa, killing hundreds of thousands of people. The earthquake that sets off the tsunami is so strong that it causes the earth to wobble on its axis and permanently shifts various geographical formations, including islands off the coast of Sumatra.

1980s: The spacecraft *Columbia* makes its first trip into space in 1981. Five years later the space shuttle *Challenger* explodes on liftoff from the Kennedy Space Center. Seven astronauts die.

Today: The *Columbia* explodes before its scheduled landing in Florida. Seven crew members are killed.

1980s: War erupts when Iraq invades Iran in an attempt to control waterways that the two countries share.

Today: War erupts between the United States and Iraq, when the United States accuses Iraq of developing weapons of mass destruction.

1980s: Attempted assassinations of Pope John Paul II and President Ronald Reagan occur. Anwar Sadat, president of Egypt, and the Iranian president, Mohammed Ali Raji, are killed.

Today: Thousands of people all over the world, including many civilians, are murdered by terrorists. Several contractors and journalists, including the American journalist Daniel Pearl, are kidnapped and beheaded or shot in the Middle East.

What Do I Read Next?

Dobyns is often called not merely a prolific writer but also one who can handle many different writing forms. In his book *Best Words, Best Order* (2003), Dobyns discusses poetry in the form of essays. In this collection, he writes about the basic elements of poetry, such as tone, pacing, metaphor, and voice. He also provides his insights on other poets' work, including that of Rilke and Anton Chekhov.

Dobyns's first collection of short stories, *Eating Naked: Stories* (2001), has been referred to as profound and funny, as Dobyns tries to capture the idiosyncrasies of modern life.

In yet another genre, Dobyns published a novel called *The Church of Dead Girls* (2001). On its surface this is a mystery story, but underneath, Dobyns writes about more than just the death of three girls. He includes the disintegration of a whole community.

Dobyns's tenth collection of poetry, one that gained a lot of critical attention, is the book *Pallbearers Envying the One Who Rides* (1999). Dobyns has said that the poems in this collection revolve around one character he calls □Heart.□ The first half of the collection is easier to read but offers suggestions on how to read the second half. This is a collection of philosophical poems that become more complex and abstract as one reads through them.

Frederick Seidel has written a book of poems, *Going Fast* (2000), that has been praised for its ability to capture contemporary life in a cinematic image. Seidel is also a screenwriter, so it comes naturally to him. This is his sixth collection, and many of the poems focus on people living in New York, Milan, Tahiti, and Paris.

Henri Cole has earned a lot of praise for his sixth collection, called *Middle Earth* (2003). Many of the poems collected here deal with the death of the poet's father. The poems are lyrical and passionate and tinged with the author's visit to Japan in search of his childhood.

In an attempt to capture a more comprehensible image of the present, Dan Beachy-Quick has written poems that focus on historic figures as they encounter a different, seemingly more simple present moment. This collection is *North True South Bright* (2003). By looking back, Beachy-Quick tries to delineate the complexities of the current age.

Reviewers have found the poems in Lucie Brock-Broido's *Trouble in Mind* (2004) to be dark but beautiful and often compare her writing to Emily Dickenson's.

Further Study

Friebert, Stuart, and David Young, eds., *Longman Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, Pearson's Education, 1989.

A highly praised collection of some of the best poetry of the twentieth century. Included in this anthology are well-written introductions to each poet and his or her work.

Gibbons, Reginald, *The Poet's Work: 29 Poets on the Origin and Practice of Their Art*, University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Reading poetry provides one kind of satisfaction, but the depth of how one reads poetry can sometimes be enhanced by understanding the process that a poet goes through to create the poetic lyrics. This book offers readers a look into that process.

Hugo, Richard, *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*, W. W. Norton, 1992.

This has been called one of the freshest collections of essays ever written on poetry. Using humor and good sense, Hugo claims that while he may not be able to teach everyone to write, he can teach them how he writes; perhaps that example will be enough to send readers off on the exciting journey of becoming an author. He also states that one will learn the most not from someone else's writing but from one's own.

Kowit, Steve, *In the Palm of Your Hand: A Poet's Portable Workshop*, Tilbury House Publishers, 1995.

Kowit's style of demonstrating how to write poetry comes with a lot of praise from reviewers, who found his □show, don't tell□ approach to writing easy to follow and enriching. If you want to get a jump start on writing, this might be a good place to start.

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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

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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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