Lake Study Guide

Lake by Rosanna Warren

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Rosanna Warren's poem □Lake□ appears in her collection *Departure*, published in 2003. As the title suggests, the overall theme of this collection is one of parting ways□whether through intended separation, a relationship breakup, a slow sinking into dementia, or death. Several poems in the book were inspired by the mental illness and eventual death of Warren's mother, and several others focus on the strains of marriage and the difficulties of remaining in love. Regardless of the subject, however, most of the poems, including □Lake,□ are underlined with messages of farewell and exit.

□Lake□ is a twenty-six-line, one-sentence work, heavily dependent on the use of water as a metaphor. A metaphor is a figure of speech that expresses an idea through the image of another object. That is, metaphors help explain thoughts or feelings by comparing them to something else, often something physical. In this poem, the speaker uses the touch and motion of water in a lake to describe the need for comfort in a time of sorrow. The water's gentle movement is like a caress to the person standing in it, but having to leave it and go back to the shore symbolizes the person's acknowledgment that temporary comfort must be abandoned in order to face the reality of sadness and loss.

□Lake□ is a relatively brief but powerful poem whose plain language and clear imagery disguise the significance of its theme. It is at once simple and striking□a testament, perhaps, to Warren's ability to communicate a complex message with moving clarity.

A note about the line breaks in the poem: although some may consider the words □would be withdrawn□ (in line 10) to be simply a continuation of line 9, which is too long to stretch across the allowed width of the page, the short phrases on the right margin of the rest of the poem appear to be significant enough to stand on their own. Their placement on the right side of the page is reason enough to consider them separately, but their content, too, merits a closer look. As such, this entry discusses □Lake□ as a twenty-six-line poem rather than as an eighteen-line poem.

A copy of the poem is also available at the *Slate* online magazine website at http://slate.msn.com/?id=2073776, where it was posted a year before *Departure* was published. Note, however, that the line breaks appear differently on the website than they do in the published book.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1953

Rosanna Warren was born July 27, 1953, in Fairfield, Connecticut. She is the daughter of two noted authors. Her father, Robert Penn Warren, won the Pulitzer Prize for both his fiction and his poetry, and her mother, Eleanor Clark, who published novels and works of nonfiction, won a National Book Award in 1965. Not surprisingly, Warren grew up in a home in which poems and stories were read aloud and books and journals were as common as many youngsters find televisions and computers today.

Warren's literary parents influenced her own desire to be a writer, and they were also able to provide her with an education that went well beyond the walls of typical grammar and high schools. When she was twelve, Warren studied French writers, such as LaFontaine, at a school in the south of France, and as a teenager, she fell in love with such Latin poets as Horace and Virgil. She eventually attended the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Rome and, later, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine.

In 1975, Warren studied at the New York Studio School and then entered Yale University, graduating summa cum laude and earning a bachelor's degree in 1976. In 1980, she received her master's degree from the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University. She accepted her first teaching position at Vanderbilt University in 1981. The following year, she served as a visiting professor at Boston University, where she eventually accepted a permanent position as assistant professor of English and modern foreign languages. In 2004, she received the Metcalf Award for excellence in teaching at Boston University and has served as the Emma Ann MacLachlan Metcalf Professor in Humanities as well as a professor of English and French. In 1999, she was elected a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

Warren's first collection of poems, *Snow Day*, was published in 1981. Subsequent volumes include *Each Leaf Shines Separate* (1984), *Stained Glass* (1993)□winner of the Lamont Poetry Prize from the Academy of American Poets□and *Departure* (2003), which includes the poem, □Lake.□ Warren has also edited or coedited collections of other poets' works and was a cotranslator of *Euripides: Suppliant Women* (1995). She is at work on a literary biography of the early-twentieth-century French poet and painter Max Jacob.

Besides the Lamont Poetry Prize, Warren has received a Pushcart Prize, the Award of Merit in poetry, the Witter Bynner Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Ingram Merrill Foundation Award. She is also the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, and, in 2000, she was the *New York Times* Resident in Literature at the American Academy in Rome.

Plot Summary

Line 1

The first line of □Lake□ introduces an ambiguous □you□ as its subject, and this individual is addressed throughout the poem. It is worth considering the actual identity of □you,□ because poets often use this second-person pronoun in various and interesting ways. Sometimes there is a detail or a description within the work that identifies□or even names□the □you.□ At other times, □you□ can refer to the audience in general, drawing readers themselves into the poem by seeming to speak directly to them. Still other poets use □you□ to mean the speaker him- or herself. That is, □you□ really means □I,□ but referring to oneself in the second person allows a *distance*□or a chance to examine a situation more objectively□that the first person does not afford. Which is the case in □Lake□?

The short answer is that we do not know. But Warren is noted as an autobiographical poet, so this □you□ could be someone in her personal life: her mother, whose illness and death were the basis for several poems in *Departure*, or her husband, since this poem falls within the so-called marriage section of *Departure*. Another viable option is that □you□ is □I,□ whether referring to a generic speaker or to Warren herself. After considerable analysis, the bottom line is still the same: who □you□ is does not affect the overall tone or message of the poem. It is simply a noteworthy subject that adds a little intrigue to the work. In this first line, then, the subject is standing in a lake, water up to the thighs, and □green light□□the lake's reflection□appears to bounce off his or her skin.

Line 2

The second line helps to further define the body of the person in the water, with the □hip hollows and stomach□ reflecting the sunlight on the lake. But a different type of light is also mentioned in this line, one that seems out of place in a natural environment. A □pilot light□ is a small jet of gas kept alight to ignite a gas burner, such as in a furnace or on a kitchen range. It is generally a blue flame, which plays off the green light mentioned in the previous line.

Line 3

This line introduces yet another odd allusion, or reference, this time to an ancient Greek god, most commonly known as the god of wine. Dionysus is also associated with all the effects that accompany drunkenness□from laughter, sexual arousal, and relaxation to forgetfulness, sickness, and violence. His correlation to sexual pleasure is called out in the poem in references to the body's midsection. The pilot light that flickers there in □ancient statues□ is a metaphor for the constant desire that burns within a human being, regardless of his or her situation.

Lines 4-5

In these lines, the speaker watches the subject walk farther out into the lake. The vision of this deeper submergence makes the speaker think that the □water might rinse away□ the pressing weight of something that troubles the subject. Note, however, that the thought lasts only □for a moment,□ suggesting that optimism is short-lived and that, in reality, the water cannot rinse away anyone's problems.

Line 6

Line 6 identifies the causes of the □heaviness□ that the subject apparently endures. First, it is the weight □of your own seasons,□ meaning not only the person's age but perhaps also the toll that years of distressing experiences have taken on the body. Second, it is the burden □of illnesses not your own.□ This phrase introduces the real crux of the poem: a loved one in □your□ life is seriously ill, and □you□ can do nothing about it. The lake, however, offers a momentary □caress□ of comfort for the person standing in it.

Lines 7-8

These lines suggest the deceptiveness of the water's soothing touch. It is described as □cool and faithless,□ implying that unlike most caresses, this one does not evoke warmth and promise. It does, however, lap □against your waist□ and take the subject □in its arms,□ and the subject, in turn, gives in to the enticement□but note that it is only □a little.□ It is as though the subject understands how easy it is to be deceived by something that feels so comforting.

Lines 9-10

The first words of line 9 reemphasize the slightness with which the subject responds to the water's caress, and the remainder of the line, along with line 10, explains the reluctance to give too much. The subject knows □how soon and how lightly□ the tender touch of the lake will □be withdrawn,□ so there is no reason to get used to its consolation. There is a deep sense of pessimism and foreboding evident in these words, and one cannot help but think something worse is about to come.

Lines 11-12

These lines pick up on the notion of □how soon□ the subject will lose the solace of the water when he or she returns to the shore, which is knotted with tree roots. Line 12 portrays the common scene of a bather drying off after a dip, but it concludes with a misleading connotation. The word □restored□ is generally a positive term, implying various good qualities or actions□renewal, healing, regained strength, and so forth□but

readers need only scan the next line to know that the restoration here is not necessarily welcomed.

Lines 13-16

These four lines primarily convey the *physical* aspects of what is restored to the subject. The □weights and measures□ refer to the difference between a body partially submerged in water and one standing on dry land. A person, of course, feels much lighter in water and will lose balance with increased depth. Many of the remaining images reflect pain in one form or another: □aches and scars,□ □cranky shoulder, cramping heel tendons, bad knees.□ All these references point to the irony of the word □restored□ in line 12. The end of line 15 and the one-word line 16 also present an interesting twist. As noted, all the qualities that return to the subject on shore are physical thus far. But the final one brings back the poem's somber tone: □bad / dreams.□

Line 17

Line 17 continues the allusion to the subject's dreams, employing an almost playful depiction with □you would recognize in the dark . . . as your own.□ Dreams, or nightmares, obviously happen when one is asleep, when the mind is □dark.□ It is also interesting to note specifically the words □your own,□ which seem directly connected to the same two words used twice in line 6.

Lines 18-19

The connection between the earlier part of the poem and this later part is further advanced in lines 18 and 19. The sentiment implied in □of illnesses not your own□ is echoed in □how those you cannot heal would remain / unhealed.□ Once again, the end of one line is cautiously hopeful until the next line contradicts it. Loved ones who are ill will not remain in a good way□they will only remain unhealed.

Lines 20-21

In these lines, the speaker describes the sorrowful and futile attempts of someone trying to reach out and comfort the sick. Even though □you□ lovingly □kiss them on the forehead,□ the subject gets no warm response. Instead, □they stare back out of the drift,□ as though completely preoccupied with their own dismal, consuming thoughts. Note the use of third-person plural to refer, presumably, to only one person with whom the subject is concerned. The vagueness and ambiguity of □them□ and □they□ provide no identity for the ill person and serve only to retain a curious distance between the speaker, the □you,□ and those who are unhealed.

Lines 22-23

These lines introduce the metaphor that brings the poem to a funereal, bleak end. The terminally ill are compared to mountains that inevitably □continue their slow, / degrading shuffle to the sea.□ Words such as □slow□ and □shuffle□ connote age or sickness or both, and the word □degrading□ suggests the debilitating effects of disease on both the body and the mind.

Lines 24-26

The final three lines enhance the metaphor, bringing the poem back around to the depiction of the natural environment with which it began. But nature is now an ominous force□like disease□that human beings can neither stop nor guide. This sense of helplessness is compared to a simple lake □swallowed / in earth's gasp□ when geological plates shift and rearrange both ocean floors and land masses. In the end, the poem's subject is resigned to the fact that the ill will soon be swallowed as well and, like an earthquake, nothing can prevent it from happening.

Themes

Terminal Illness

Although a specific disease is never identified in the poem, a major theme of □Lake□ is the grief and resignation that naturally accompany serious illness, especially when it is terminal. Words such as □heaviness,□ □faithless,□ and □withdrawn□ all point to a somber mindset, and the phrase □those you cannot heal would remain / unhealed□ clearly implies that there is no recovery expected. Warren uses a water motif□a thematic or metaphoric element that recurs throughout a work□to portray both faint hope and final abandonment in the process of dealing with incurable sickness. In the beginning, the subject walks deeper into the lake in a halfhearted effort to □rinse away□ emotional pain. Toward the middle of the poem, the □you□ is back on the shore, drying off, while a loved one simply stares □back out of the drift,□ apparently lost in melancholy thoughts. In the end, mountains crumble to the sea, and the lake is □swallowed□ by the ocean□a powerful act of nature, not to be denied, like death.

While □Lake□ concludes on an obviously sad note, its overall sorrowful tone is evident long before, when the idea of illness is introduced. Even the futile attempt to alleviate grief with the water's caress seems mournful. The □you□ is unable to enjoy a moment of solace because he or she knows the moment will soon be gone and there will be only dry, □rootwebbed□ land to stand on. This pictorial description is simply a poetic way of saying that you cannot enjoy a moment of life, because the death of one you love is just around the corner. Essentially, the mere presence of terminal illness is a heavy weight on the shoulders of all it touches. In this poem, the identities of those touched are vague at best, but the heaviness of disease is unmistakable.

Disease and Human Perspective

If the most prominent theme in □Lake□ is terminal illness, human perspective on the subject is an important companion theme. But the twist in this poem is that the perspective is not that of the person who is ill but of someone who must bear the burden of having a loved one who is ill. That is, the □you□ whose thoughts and actions dominate the work is not sick. Rather, it is an ambiguous figure who is dying and who is portrayed only in the brief, vague terms of sitting on the shore with a blank stare on his or her face.

Warren explores this theme with such grace and subtlety that it is almost unnoticeable on first reading. The poem makes no dramatic announcement about perspective, and it is quite easy to assume that the viewpoint of the sick will be given equal consideration to that of the healthy. But that is not the case. The first word of □Lake□ establishes the subject of the work, and in line 6, the speaker makes clear that the illnesses are □not your own.□ Whose, then, are they?

Not until line 18 is anyone else mentioned and then only as an unknown □those.□ Note, however, that the □you□ is consistently paired with the ambiguous third-person reference: □those you cannot heal,□ □you reach for them, [you] kiss them on the forehead.□ Even though the one suffering from illness is now brought into the picture, it is still the perspective of the subject □you□ that is important. The heaviness described in the poem is that of the subject, not of the ill person, and it is □you□ who bears the weight of loss and sorrow and gloom. The subject is portrayed in detail, both emotionally and physically, and from these descriptions one can both see the subject and feel what he or she is going through. The mountain-and-sea metaphor that rounds out the poem compares a progressing disease to a □slow / degrading shuffle to the sea□ while it also indicates the hopeless mindset of the subject who imagines the scene in the first place. That is, line 22 makes it clear that □you knew□ that the illness □would continue,□ and, from the subject's perspective, the end of the loved one's life will be like a lake swallowed up by an immense ocean□an ocean indifferent to grief, as it manages only a □yawn.□

Style

Contemporary Free Verse

In the late nineteenth century, French poets such as Arthur Rimbaud and Jules Laforgue started a literary revolt against the long-established rules of what makes a poem a poem, which at the time were believed to be strict adherence to specific patterns of rhyme and meter. The *vers libre* (free verse) movement called for a relaxation of poetic restrictions, allowing the poet to compose in a more natural voice using common language to express familiar themes. Contemporary free verse simply refers to the progression of original free verse in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries toward even fewer restrictions, especially with regard to content and language usage. Contemporary free verse poets do not shy away from subjects that are sexual, violent, or controversial in nature, and descriptions are usually presented in a plain, conversational manner.

Metaphor and Allusion

In □Lake,□ the language is predominantly straightforward and unadorned, with a splash of metaphor here and there to add intrigue. For instance, there is a lengthy description of the subject standing in waist-high water and then coming to shore to dry off the □cranky shoulder, cramping heel tendons, [and] bad knees.□ These solely physical aspects are set against a more highbrow and obscure allusion to □ancient statues of Dionysus□ as well as to the highly imagistic metaphor that concludes the poem. Adding allusions to creative works is an effective way to make an idea or description more easily understood by referencing something familiar. At the end of the poem, for instance, Warren alludes to the actual shifting of earth's continental plates and the resulting degradation of land and water to describe how disease □shifts□ human bodies and minds and ultimately □degrades□ them. Regardless of the content, however, the language is primarily simple and conversational, with no rhyme or metrical patterns.

Line Breaks and Margins

The most noticeable aspect of this poem's construction begins with line 9 and runs through to the finish at line 26. In typical poems, the second part of a line break is indented with one tab, or a few letter spaces, from the left margin. The first and second parts are often considered one line that is simply too long to fit in the allowed page width. But here the indents are wide enough to push the second parts of line breaks to the right margin of the page, not only making them stand out but also warranting their consideration as separate lines instead of continuations of previous lines. The effect is beneficial. It serves to call attention to important ironies and concepts in the work. For example, the phrase □bad knees□ leads directly□and surprisingly□into □bad / dreams□; □would remain□ drops immediately into □unhealed.□ Lines 25 and 26 are both very short and produce their own interesting effect on the page. The phrase □lake

was swallowed,□ set against the right margin, flows into □in earth's gasp, ocean's yawn,□ set against the left margin. Visually, the lines appear with a clear gap between them, creating their own □yawn□ on the page.

Historical Context

Dementia

Warren does not specify any year or even a decade in which □Lake□ takes place, nor is any particular region or state identified. The place is insignificant, but readers may make a careful, and educated, assumption about the time period. This poem is probably inspired by the author's awareness of her mother's deteriorating mental faculties due to dementia, which some critical accounts suggest accompanied the despondency and melancholy that Eleanor Clark sank into after Robert Penn Warren's death in 1989. Clark died in 1996. Given these facts and suggestions, it is safe to consider the time frame for □Lake□ as the early to mid-1990s; its composition time may be the same or a few years later.

By the end of the twentieth century, great strides had been made in studying various types of dementia, particularly Alzheimer's after the former president Ronald Reagan was diagnosed with the disease in 1994. Ironically, the increased number of older people suffering from these mental ailments is commonly credited to the fact that humans are living longer. In general, dementia is a progressive brain dysfunction that leads to an increasing restriction of daily activities. A slow destruction of nerve cells in the brain causes the victim to lose the ability to function normally and to communicate thoughts and feelings effectively. Typical symptoms include forgetfulness, difficulties performing familiar activities, language problems, impaired judgment, and problems with abstract thinking.

Although data on the frequency of dementia have been more closely studied in recent years, there is no indication that the illness occurs any more or less often than in the past, when not as much attention was afforded it. In general, statistics show that its frequency increases with age, with about 2 percent of people age sixty-five to seventy suffering from it, 5 percent of those age seventy-five to eighty, and 20 percent of those age eighty-five to ninety. Nearly one in three persons over the age of ninety is a victim.

In the 1990s and into the early twenty-first century, treatment for the various types of dementia included a combination of physical, emotional, and mental activities. Thinking and memory training as well as physical therapy and anti-dementia or other types of drugs combine to help slow down the progression of this mentally debilitating disease. As yet, there is no cure. Warren's acknowledgment of this unfortunate fact is made clear in her declaration that □those you cannot heal would remain / unhealed.□

Tsunamis

It is perhaps apt to mention the startling coincidence of the metaphor that concludes □Lake□ and the devastating natural disaster that happened fourteen months after *Departure* was published. Warren ends the work with □until continental plates shifted in

their sleep, and this whole / lake was swallowed / in earth's gasp, ocean's yawn.□ These lines describe poetically, and nearly perfectly, the natural phenomenon known as a tsunami.

Obviously, Warren was not making geological predictions and had no idea of what was to come the following year, but anyone reading this poem today may be ominously reminded of the terrible event that struck on December 26, 2004. On this date, the biggest earthquake in forty years occurred between the Australian and Eurasian plates in the Indian Ocean. The quake caused the seafloor to rupture along the fault line, triggering a tsunami that spread thousands of miles over a seven-hour period. A tsunami is not actually a single wave, but a series of waves that can travel across the ocean at speeds of more than five hundred miles an hour. In the deep ocean, hundreds of miles can separate wave crests. As a tsunami enters the shallows of coastlines in its path, its velocity slows, but its height increases. A tsunami that is just a few feet or yards high from trough to crest can suddenly rise to heights of over a hundred and fifty feet as it hits the shore, destroying land, buildings, and, of course, life.

The December 26 tsunami originated in the Indian Ocean just north of Simeulue Island, off the western coast of northern Sumatra, Indonesia. The resulting wave destroyed shorelines along Indonesia, Sri Lanka, South India, Thailand, the east coast of Africa, and other countries. The death toll in early 2005 stood at over 283,000 people, but with more bodies still being discovered on a daily basis□and given that many of those who were swept out to sea will never be found□an accurate figure on loss of life may never be known. This tragedy has left survivors who know all too well what it is like to be □swallowed / in earth's gasp, ocean's yawn.□

Critical Overview

The overall critical response to Warren's poetry□and to *Departure*, in particular□has been mixed. Critics seem to want to praise her work (and many do), but many cannot defer from registering a common complaint: she is too academic. Still, Warren's four poetry collections have been generally well received, despite a few jibes scattered throughout the reviews.

In his column for *Poetry* magazine, the poet and critic David Orr points out that *Departure* is obviously the work of someone well versed in both classical literature and art. He notes that readers are subjected to a string of allusions, such as to □the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, Wilfred Owen, Georg Trakl,□ and more than half dozen others. Orr takes a humorous shot at Warren, saying, □So if you're looking for poems about corn dogs and the J. Geils Band, get ready for disappointment.□ Orr continues with an offhanded compliment, however, noting that □most of the work in *Departure* takes up the volatile subjects of love and death (particularly the death of the poet's mother), with the former pieces generally being more successful than the latter.□

The reviewer Judy Clarence, writing for *Library Journal*, notes, as Orr did, that the obscure allusions in some of the poems may make the poems □inaccessible□ to some readers, but she also calls Warren □one of today's outstanding American poets□ and describes the poems in *Departure* as □thoroughly grounded and stunningly written explorations of death, the passage of time, loss, and impermanence.□ Echoing this praise, a book critic for *Publishers Weekly* describes the poems as □long and masterfully elaborate sentences and unrhymed stanzas□ and includes □Lake□ among the poems that □display insight and hidden discipline.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, she examines the poem's reference to Dionysus as an odd, yet poignant allusion in a work that offers no obvious reason for its inclusion.

On its own, □Lake□ is an obscure poem in regard to defining its persona and the relationship between the speaker and subject or the subject and the mysterious □they.□ But when the poem is considered among the others in *Departure*, readers can make intelligent guesses about its source of inspiration□the poet is the speaker, the speaker is the subject, and the □they□ is the speaker's ailing mother suffering from incurable dementia. Or are they?

In the end, the truth about specific identities makes little difference. What is noteworthy, however, is the intriguing one-time allusion to Dionysus, a famous Greek god, that seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with the subject, tone, theme, and style of the poem.

□Lake□ is undoubtedly a work about the desperation, grief, and final resignation of someone dealing with the pending death of a loved one. Twenty-four of its twenty-six lines are dedicated to the description of the subject's futile attempt to escape pain□both emotional and physical□and the mournful acknowledgment that reaching out, touching, and kissing the one who is ill will not save him or her from a □slow, / degrading shuffle to the sea.□

But then there are lines 2 and 3. Like the well-known □sore thumb,□ these two lines stand out with their strange and sudden departure from the seemingly straightforward running motif of the poem. What is the point of this quirky allusion? Why is it mentioned only once? To make sense of this imagery from mythology that appears early on in □Lake,□ readers need to understand who Dionysus is and what possible connection he may have to a poem about sorrow, death, and desperate longing.

Most commonly, Dionysus□and his Roman counterpart, Bacchus□is known as the god of wine, but that is only the beginning. A supreme being whose claim to fame is a popular drink must have some □baggage□ to rule over as well. For Dionysus, it is all the associations, both good and bad, that come along with being drunk□from giddy happiness, relaxation, and sexual arousal to anger, depression, self-doubt, and violence. Dionysus is the god of all these.

What many abbreviated accounts of Dionysus's role in mythology fail to mention is that he is also noted as the archetype of dying and resurrecting in the Greek world. Even though there are a variety of scenarios detailing his birth and early life, one common thread that runs among them is that Dionysus □dies□ several times or is transformed into a different being, such as a snake or other animal. Each time, however, he returns to life, a vital and powerful god.

Many scholarly studies in Greek mythology concentrate more on this □dying and renewing□ aspect of Dionysus than on his noted drinking and reveling. And it is likely this same aspect that underlies Warren's inclusion of an allusion to the motley god in □Lake.□ Themes of illness and death are evident in the poem, but □the pilot light / [that] flickers in ancient statues of Dionysus□ adds a subtle, yet important dimension to the subject's and/or speaker's demeanor regarding the loss of a loved one.

For the first half of □Lake,□ the □you□ is portrayed in water, and there is a clear desire for what he or she would like the water to do: □rinse away the heaviness□ that weighs on the subject's mind. But the speaker has already likened the subject to Dionysus, with the □green light□ shining off □your hip hollows and stomach□ like the pilot light in statues of the ancient god. This comparison implies that □you□ is also going through a process of dying and resurrecting. While the subject is not the one who is ill, the grief that he or she experiences is a kind of death□a killing of the spirit, so to speak. But if the subject is like Dionysus, a rebirth or renewal will follow the demise.

Does this, then, suggest that the poem is not as bleak or pessimistic as a less-detailed reading would imply? Is there actually something positive about the speaker's or subject's approach to such a difficult time? Not likely. Logistics alone indicate otherwise, with the reference to Dionysus being extremely brief and the clear statement on □how soon and how lightly that touch / would be withdrawn□ closing the door on any hope for recovery. And if this line closes the door, the poem's ending nails it shut.

After the subject emerges from the water, □Lake□ takes a downward spiral to the bottom of hopelessness and resignation. The speaker's statements about what the subject accepts as reality are straightforward and unyielding: □you knew, too, how those you cannot heal would remain / unhealed,□ □you knew the mountains would continue their slow, / degrading shuffle to the sea.□ The subject does not merely believe□the subject knows.

The only thing left to ponder, then, is whether this doleful abandonment applies across the board for the subject□that is, regarding the sick loved one, as well as him- or herself and life in general□or if the Dionysus allusion suggests the possibility of renewal, at least for the □you.□ Since Warren is noted for (or accused of, in some cases) being a bit erudite and inaccessible in her poetry, it may stand to reason that this cryptic, short-lived reference to a Greek god is included simply as a brainteaser. Its brevity makes it easy to dismiss as mere poetic fluff, but it is unlikely that a highly academic, cultivated poet like Warren would throw something in as fluff. A brainteaser is another matter.

Anyone who knows a bit of biographical information about Warrren knows that she is well versed in the classics, that she has years of experience studying and living in Europe, and that her work does not shy away from grandiose allusions□from classical writers and mythology to French poets and Italian painters. Whether readers actually appreciate the effort is sometimes doubtful, but it is safe to assume that Warren's intent is sincere. In □Lake,□ Dionysus must serve a purpose. For those who read the poem seriously and carefully, he definitely causes readers to stop and *think*.

The contention here is that *that* is his purpose. Readers not at all familiar with Dionysus have quite a bit of research to do, but even those who can readily name him as the god of wine and good times must be puzzled by his presence in a poem whose subject and tone are just the opposite. The reader is forced to delve a little deeper into the □pilot light□ metaphor and ask what it has to do with Dionysus and what Dionysus has to do with a person standing in a lake trying to escape the emotional turmoil of depression, grief, and death. Finding the answer may not be easy, but then the brain would not get much of a workout if it were.

In the end, the allusion to Dionysus has no bearing on the overall meaning and subject of the poem. Read it through and simply omit the phrase □which is where the pilot light / flickers in ancient statues of Dionysus.□ The meaning does not change, nor does the tone or any of the themes. Even the syntax remains coherent. The inclusion of this reference, then, is arbitrary, but it is there nonetheless. Maybe it signifies that the subject will □live again□ after the loved one is gone or maybe it even implies that the sick will be resurrected in one form or another, but neither of these possibilities is certain. What is certain is that an odd allusion usually generates curiosity and curiosity makes people think. If for no other reason, the poet is probably satisfied with that.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on □Lake,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Heims is a writer and teacher working in Paris. In this essay, he argues that the poet's perception and the world she perceives determine each other and that the poem derives its energy from this interaction.

Whatever else it may be, a poem is an act of transformation. By means of a poem, a poet's consciousness and experience become part of the world, and parts of the world become aspects of the poet's consciousness and experience. This dizzying interchange, this delicate interaction, creates the potential stored in the poem, which is released as the energy of poetry when the poem is read or recited.

Words turn into things, and things turn into words. The tangible objects of the world represent the intangible sensations□thoughts and feelings□of the poet, and the intangible sensations of the poet□those thoughts and feelings□render the tangible objects of the world meaningful and even symbolic, that is, representative of things they commonly, in themselves, are not. The process of poetic transformation activates the essential process of connection that joins together the person and the world in an unstrained unity, even in the face of the great terrors of nature, such as passion, catastrophe, and mortality, which threaten continuously to overwhelm us with their unrelenting power.

A connection as fundamental as the connection between any person and the world is the connection that we have to ourselves. It is a connection that is continually broken and repaired by consciousness. Because of consciousness, each of us is divided into our own subject perceiving ourselves (and even perceiving ourselves perceiving) and our own object perceived. Yet it is through this split, through conscious perception, that we know ourselves, become whole, and know the world in which we find ourselves.

Rosanna Warren's poem □Lake□ is a meditation, a wide-awake, trancelike contemplation of her own experience of herself through her experience of nature. She stands momentarily at a still center of a world that is anything but still. In □Lake□ the poet□divided between the speaker and the □you□ to whom she speaks□encounters her own painful, apparently incurable anguish, and her own division, in her several sorts of encounters. The poem describes an encounter with nature: □You stood thigh-deep in water.□ Warren gives her thoughts about nature and about culture (□ancient statues of Dionysus□), her own burdens (□the heaviness of your own seasons / and of illnesses not your own□), and the relation between herself and nature as that relationship is formed by her consciousness of nature, by her personification of it (□it [the lake water] lapped against your waist, / it took you in its arms□).

In the poem Warren transforms the simple act of slowly stepping into a lake into an encounter with what the Greeks would call her *moira*, meaning her portion, the substance and the conditions of her life, including those aspects of being and feeling (with regard to the contents of her life) that define and delineate her.

Fire and water meet and represent the two forces that encounter each other in the first two lines of the poem□the glancing comfort of the reflection of the lapping water and the flickering frenzy of Dionysian fire. The poet feels the power that both exercise upon her as she steps into the lake, □thigh-deep in water.□ The lake water that embraces her up to the thighs as she enters it reflects itself as glancing □green light□ on her □hip hollows and stomach□ and introduces us to the first moment of transformation, which is accomplished by means of the process of mental association. The glancing light of the water becomes a flickering Dionysian fire, a disturbing frenzy beyond our rational control, as a natural event reminds her of how the ancient Greeks represented the power of one of their gods in a work of art. The part of her body that is illuminated is □where the pilot light / flickers in ancient statues of Dionysus.□ The soothing, but fleeting caress of water and the unsteadiness of passionate energy encounter each other in the image. Flame and water meet at the center of her body and the center of her consciousness. Torment and comfort approach each other in the struggle between what is real and what is desired.

In this encounter, we begin to learn the situation of the poet. Trouble burns inside her. She hopes for something soothing from without, from outside herself. She catalogues her pain: □the heaviness / of your own seasons and of illnesses not your own,□ □the weights and measures, pulses, aches and scars you / know by heart, / the cranky shoulder, cramping heel tendons, bad knees, bad / dreams.□ Against this trouble, she personifies the water as a consoling lover, a tender comforter with the power to □rinse away the heaviness.□ But the water's □caress□ is □cool and faithless.□ It is not enduring: □it lapped against your waist, / it took you in its arms,□ but □how lightly that touch / would be withdrawn.□ This touch of this water will not extinguish that Dionysian fire piloting the poet's anguish. In consequence, when □it [the water] took you in its arms . . . you gave yourself, a little, / only a little, knowing how soon and how lightly that touch / would be withdrawn.□

From the fluid medium of short-lived solace, the poet returns to the firmer territory of her own life, □standing again on the rootwebbed / shore.□ The shore is solid ground, not flowing and disappearing, but it is □rootwebbed.□ Her trouble is the ground under her feet, the history upon which she stands, and by means of it she identifies herself. This, her real condition, is her problem and her solace. It is more permanently solacing in her acceptance of it□this tangled foundation of what is, that which supports and grounds her□than the fleeting caresses of water. Warren expresses its power through the economy that is peculiar and particular to successful poetry, in this case, by the single placement of a word that by that placement carries two meanings, which contradict each other and therefore coexist.

The word □restored,□ which ends the line □how soon you would be standing again on the rootwebbed / shore, drying, restored□ if the line is read end-stopped, that is, if the reader pauses at the end of the line, takes on a positive character. It suggests being brought back to life, being brought up to capacity, being □restored,□ becoming whole, an intransitive quality of the thing itself, something about the poet. But even though the line ends with that word and therefore permits us to stop momentarily as we read, there is no punctuation, and we must continue and let the sense slide over the side of the line

into the next line, a poetic device called □enjambment.□ This is what we get: □how soon you would be standing again on the rootwebbed / shore, drying, restored / to the weights and measures, pulses, aches and scars you know by heart.□ The glancing possibility of comfort slips away like water to be replaced by the solidities of □weights and measures, pulses, aches and scars.□ She is not her own but is given over, □restored,□ *to* the actualities of her life.

The simultaneous representation of opposite realities achieved by the contrasting meanings united in the word □restored□ governs the tone of the rest of the poem, which, although it is full of anguish, even despair, and death violence, has a mournful tone of calm acceptance. The content is grim. Warren speaks of □how those you cannot heal would remain / unhealed / though you reach for them, kiss them on the forehead, and / they stare back out of the drift.□ Here is a tender presentation of caretaking, but the caretaking brings neither solace nor connection. Rather than a last or a lasting communion with a departing beloved, such attentions signify hopelessness. The poet realizes the inevitability of pure death, of departure itself.

But the poet pictures death only as the plight of matter. □Lake,□ which begins with the poet's conscious confrontation with energy, with the lapping of water and the flickering of fire, concludes with images of heavy and decaying lifeless matter: □the mountains would continue their slow, / degrading shuffle to the sea / until continental plates shifted in their sleep.□ The end of what is tangible is slow, monumental, cataclysmic, indifferent, and eerily peaceful. The gently erotic and short-lived consolation of lapping water that figures in the first lines of the poem is transformed into the strange solace of an overwhelming and all-encompassing flood in the last lines.

What remains after matter's destruction is the energy into which it has returned, which has consumed it: □this whole / lake was swallowed / in earth's gasp, ocean's yawn.□ And these overwhelming forces, □earth's gasp, ocean's yawn,□ are encompassed in the poet's consciousness and expressed in her words through the transformations accomplished by her art, which puts them under her poetic sovereignty, inside the domain of her poem, subject to her imagination for their existence.

Source: Neil Heims, Critical Essay on □Lake,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

Visit the *Slate* magazine website at http://slate.msn.com/?id=2073776 and hear Warren read □Lake.□ The website features a section called □A weekly poem, read by the author.□ The former poet laureate Robert Pinsky is the poetry editor for *Slate* and the creator of the weekly audio poem page.

Topics for Further Study

In the past ten to fifteen years, several notable people have announced that they have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Present to your class the reason(s) that you believe famous people make their diagnoses public and what effect the disclosure has on other people with Alzheimer's, on medical professionals who research and treat the disease, and on American society in general. Invite classmates to offer their own opinions as well.

Warren is noted for her allusions to figures from Greek and Roman mythology as well as to actual writers and artists from the ancient world. Write an essay on why she might find these metaphorical references so attractive, and give your opinion on whether they strengthen or weaken her otherwise contemporary style and themes.

Write a personal essay on where you might turn for comfort or for a momentary distraction from stress and sorrow if a loved one in your life were diagnosed with an incurable disease. Would it be an actual place, another person, a hobby, or any one thing in particular?

Write a poem in which line breaks play as important a role as the subject or theme. Then write a brief synopsis of the process. Is it difficult to place such emphasis on line breaks? Does the construction itself get in the way of just saying what you want to say? Explain why or why not.

What Do I Read Next?

In a *Boston Review* article (Vol. 29, October-November 2004) titled "Not Your Father's Formalism," the critic Rafael Campo offers interesting commentary on contemporary poets writing in formal verse. Campo contends that poets like Warren are not quite as strict as the formalists of long ago, but neither are they as loose as many contemporary experimental writers. Campo addresses Warren's *Departure* as well as new volumes by Marilyn Hacker and Mimi Khalvati.

When Warren's mother, Eleanor Clark, was diagnosed with macular degeneration, she reacted with shock and despair. But she also used her permanently impaired eyesight as inspiration for *Eyes, etc.: A Memoir* (1977). Clark's near-blindness and later decline into dementia were the source for several poems in *Departure*, and this autobiographical book by Clark is a stirring account of the brave and determined battles she waged in later life.

Deborah Digges, a poet and a contemporary of Warren, recently published *Trapeze* (2004). Her work is similar to Warren's in style and in substance—highbrow at times but also somber in addressing familiar themes. In this volume, several poems focus on loved ones who are dealing with loss and death, while others describe the rural New England landscape, with its woods, gardens, and barns.

Margaret Lay-Dopyera offers a sometimes sad, sometimes funny, always intense account of what it is like to live with parents suffering from Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases in *Until the Trees Are Bare: Losing One's Parents to Dementia* (2002). Like Warren, Lay-Dopyera experienced firsthand the heartbreak, anguish, and exasperation of watching a parent (both, in Lay-Dopyera's case) lose the capacity to think, reason, and remember.

Further Study

Clark, Eleanor, *The Oysters of Locmariaquer*, 1965, reprint, Ecco Press, 1998.

This travelogue earned Warren's mother, Eleanor Clark, a National Book Award in 1965. It explores life in the town of Locmariaquer in Brittany, a region in southern France where Warren spent part of her childhood. Clark focuses on the lives of the people who cultivate the famous Belon oysters that come from this region as well as the history of the area.

Simic, Charles, □Difference in Similarity,□ in *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 51, No. 4, March 11, 2004, pp. 21-23.

In this review, the poet and critic Simic addresses the wide variety of style and content found in contemporary American poetry. Claiming □it is no longer easy to stick labels on poets,□ he focuses on three new collections in particular, including *Departure*.

Warren, Robert Penn, *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, Louisiana State University Press, 1998.

This lengthy, comprehensive collection of Warren's father's poetry, edited by John Burt, is worth perusing, even if readers do not make it through all 800-plus pages. Robert Penn Warren's influence on his daughter's writing is unmistakable, and many poems in this collection give evidence of that.

Warren, Rosanna, *Stained Glass*, W. W. Norton, 1993.

Stained Glass is Warren's most acclaimed volume of poetry to date, and it is interesting to compare its poems to those in *Departure*, published ten years later. *Stained Glass* won the Lamont Poetry Prize from the Academy of American Poets.

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Clarence, Judy, Review of *Departure*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 128, No. 16, October 1, 2003, p. 80.

Orr, David, □Eight Takes,□ in *Poetry*, Vol. 184, No. 4, August 2004, pp. 305-16.

Review of *Departure*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 250, No. 43, October 27, 2003, pp. 60-61.

Warren, Rosanna, *Departure*, W. W. Norton, 2003, p. 111.

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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