The Last Question Study Guide

The Last Question by Dorothy Parker

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Introduction

"The Last Question," published in Dorothy Parker's 1928 collection *Sunset Gun* and reprinted in *The Portable Dorothy Parker*, is a poem that greatly appealed to the sensibility of the 1920s through its complex tone of world-weariness and its almost fatalistic acceptance of the dangers brought on by a new love affair. The poem was almost shocking in its day for its frank acceptance of female sexuality and an unsentimental depiction of a relationship that looks doomed from the outset. Parker used her own celebrity as a writer to become a sort of role model for young women of her time. Though the poem appears fairly conventional in its use of rhyme, rhythm, and repetition, its theme reflected the spirit of the flapper generation that came to womanhood immediately after World War I. This generation exulted in new liberties and the breaking away of old customs. There are costs, however, to throwing off the old certainties, and this poem reflects those costs, showing touches of despair and self-destructiveness. The poem is rebellious without being revolutionary. It tries to subvert the old rules of romance by flouting them; it shows a witty and sardonic woman's love affair, but it does not propose any specific cure for the dangers of the liaison. It does not suggest that there is any way to remake human relationships in a feminist mold.

Author Biography

Dorothy Rothschild Parker was born in 1893 in West End, New Jersey, to Eliza Marston Roths- child, a Scottish Protestant who died shortly after Dorothy's birth, and J. Henry Rothschild, a wealthy Jewish garment manufacturer. Parker felt shame concerning her mixed ethnic and religious background and later stated that she would write an autobiography if only to entitle it *Mongrel*. Parker was sent to the exclusive Miss Dana's school in Morristown, New Jersey, after being expelled from the Blessed Sacrament Convent in New York, where she had received a classical education. In June 1917, she married Edwin Pond Parker II, a high-society, heavy-drinking stockbroker. During the 1920s, when Edwin was overseas on two years of military service, Parker became well known in New York literary and theatrical societies as a member of the Algonquin Round Table, which included writers Robert Benchley, Alexander Woollcott, Franklin Pierce Adams, and George S. Kaufman, among others. This group met regularly for lunches and afternoons of drinking and verbal banter at the Algonquin Hotel and became famous when newspaper columnists began reporting their activities and conversations. Parker became an often-quoted (and misquoted) member of the Round Table, gaining notoriety for her sardonic wit. She also gained favorable recognition as the pseudonymous literary critic "Constant Reader," appearing in the *New Yorker*'s book review column from 1927 to 1928, and occasionally thereafter. Her literary reputation rests largely on the poetry and short stories she wrote during the period of 1926-1938, including "Big Blond," which won the O. Henry Award for best short story in 1929.

Heavy drinking, depression, and numerous love affairs punctuated Parker's personal life. She had an abortion and attempted suicide in 1923 (the first of three attempts) and was divorced from Edwin Pond Parker II in 1928. Parker's most enduring relationship was with her second husband, actor Alan Campbell, whom she married in 1933, divorced in 1947, and remarried in 1950. Together, they collaborated on sixteen film scripts, their most notable effort being *A Star Is Born*, which was nominated for an Academy Award. Despite her success, Parker disliked what she considered Hollywood superficiality, and her association with left-wing political groups caused the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to investigate her as a possible Communist subversive during the 1950s. Finding it increasingly difficult to write because of ill health, Parker published only an occasional book review during the 1960s. She died in 1967 and willed the bulk of her estate to civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

As one might expect from a poem entitled "The Last Question," this is a poem that poses a number of questions and concludes with one. This poem is very brief, almost epigrammatic. Unlike the epigram, however, which relies for its success on a pithy, witty, concise statement of some interesting or surprising observation, this poem alternates between questions posed and questions answered. Since the poem is only eight lines long, two brief quatrains, the task of summarizing it is relatively easy. It is a poem that seems to be spoken in two voices. One voice asks questions and one answers them. The first two words of the poem are repeated, "New love, new love." This repetition emphasizes each word. What is important in this poem is the newness of the relationship. "Love" might also be expressed as "lover," but the word "love" functions as a name. The speaker of the first line is addressing her lover, asking where he will lead her. It is worth noting that in this poem it is the new lover, presumably male, who will do all of the leading. Men lead and women follow according to the old rules of romance. This poem works through hints, through things that can be inferred but that are not stated. Though these hints are quite clear, they accumulate inevitably to produce a mounting tone of anxiety.

Asking where a new love may lead is, one must suppose, generally a pleasant prospect. Yet, in this poem, there is more than a hint of anxiety, an intimation immediately validated by the response. The key terms in the second line are "narrow" and "crooked." Instead of promising openness in all its manifestations, such as openness of possibility, openness of spirit, openness to growth and change, the respondent emphasizes its opposite, narrowness. Likewise, "crooked" is a synonym for "dishonest" or "deceitful" or "devious." There is little promise in the opening interchange. The second exchange of question and answer does not bring reassurance. The speaker of the first and third lines, who may safely be inferred to be the poet herself, asks how her new love will "slake" and "feed" her. Clearly, a thirst is slaked by water or other liquid, and hunger is fed through food. Metaphorically, though, the poet is talking about the satisfaction of other desires. What desires might these be? Though one possibility is that these are sexual desires, the poem becomes more poignant if these are understood as representing other desires that the speaker needs to have satisfied. As they are presented in the guise of food and drink, these desires are to be associated with personal or psychological nutrition. The answer to the second question is rather sinister. Instead of promising his beloved all sorts of comfort and nourishment, the new love offers only "bitter yellow berries," which are unappetizing and perhaps poisonous, and "a sharp new wine" which may, indeed, prove to be intoxicating, but which is not desirable or appetizing. In only four lines, Parker has presented two questions, each of them an appeal for guidance or support, and the replies indicate that this guidance and sustenance will not be forthcoming. At this point in the poem, the questioner seems to have accepted the ideology of romance that literature and culture have presented as appropriate for women. The poem would like to subvert this ideology, but it will

ultimately, because of its brevity and fatalism, prove incapable of offering anything to replace it.

Stanza 2

The second stanza marks a subtle shift, one that the casual reader might not notice. It begins as the first stanza does, with "New love, new love." This parallelism simultaneously emphasizes two seemingly contradictory aspects of the poem. The phrase gives a repetition of form and reiteration of the same kind of question that has been asked already on the one hand, and it also signifies a new beginning, a new approach, or an evolving attitude in the poem. The speaker asks if she will be forsaken. The last word encapsulates all the fears of the previous stanza. It is the fear of being jilted, dumped, dropped, and disregarded that causes the speaker great anxiety. Again, the passivity of female gender roles emerges. Parker wrote in a period in which women might signal their availability to men in a number of indirect ways, but they were forbidden by the mating practices of their time to take the initiative and actually state their desires. Consequently, a woman who was forsaken in love had to pull herself together and wait around for another suitor to find her attractive. Parker's biographers recount that she was not at all passive in her amorous relationships, that perhaps she was less conventional in her own life than this poem seems to be. If so, this disconnect between biography and poetry may indicate several interesting things. First, it shows the limits to which a reading audience in 1928 could be taken, and the boundaries of good taste that should not be transgressed. Parker's poems were mildly shocking in their time; moralists sighed and fumed, but there was nothing they could do about these poems except signal their disapproval. Though censorship existed and was sometimes harshly employed, this poem is not at all obscene, and the censors of the time would have had no grounds for action. Second, the contradictions between Parker's own love life and the more sedate and conventional constructions of the poem worked subversively, rebelliously, to call attention to the insecurity of women in their love affairs. There are two speakers in this poem, a woman and a man, and all the sympathy lies with the woman. Third, any challenge to contemporary sexual mores was implicit. Parker invokes no alternative ideology. But then, this is only an eight-line poem, and it limits itself to expressing anxiety and frustration, so it may be unfair to expect it to do more.

The ambiguities multiply, introducing new possibilities. In response to the plaintive inquiry about being forsaken, the masculine voice of the poem gives a response that, on first glance, seems to be the hardhearted response of a man who is in emotional charge of the relationship, expressing his intention to go on to other conquests while leaving the lady behind. And, indeed, this line, like the second and fourth lines, is italicized, lending further weight to the interpretation that all three are spoken in another voice. But, the question of who will sigh begins to arise with this line. It is not absolutely certain that the man will not be the one to be left behind, and in this uncertainty resides all the woman's power. In fact, she may be the one to dump him. Such a possibility would have seemed quite daring and exciting to young women of the 1920s.

Finally, the last question indicated by the title is spoken. Interestingly, this is a double question. The last question ambiguously means that it is enjoyable to sleep in the arms of one's new love, but "slumber" also represents a lack of awareness that may lead to bitterness and pain. Likewise, "awaken" is used both literally and metaphorically. The word represents a growing consciousness of the woman's power to leave the man if she chooses. The final line brings the poem to an ambiguous and unsettling conclusion. On the one hand, there is clear evidence that the woman will be the one with the broken heart. Many of Parker's other poems have similar themes. If love freely given outside the bonds of matrimony became fashionable during the 1920s, at least in upper-middle-class East Coast urban centers among educated sophisticates, it also became important for someone like Parker to write knowingly of love's bruises, and of its power. One of the liberating possibilities is that a strong, thoroughly modern woman might leave the man sobbing in her wake. Perhaps such an outcome is unlikely, but it is at least possible, and this complex blend of self-pity and self-assertion was itself an intoxicating sharp new wine to the reading public of the Roaring Twenties.

Themes

Anxiety

One of the most evident themes in "The Last Question" is its expression of anxiety. This is clearly the burning question of one who is embarking on a brand-new love affair, one that, along with its presumed joys, also seems to have more than its share of anxious moments. The speaker looks to the future and inquires about where she will be taken. The response is not promising. Something vaguely menacing comes out through this line. The way is not straight and narrow, but crooked and narrow, and the crookedness of the path implies some kind of treachery. The poet goes on to ask about how she is to be supported by her new lover, how she is to be fed, and how her thirst is to be slaked. Clearly there is metaphor working here; she is not asking about lunch and dinner, but about emotional support. Again the response comes, menacingly. Bitterness in nature is associated with poison, and, just as this love is new, so is the wine that will quench its thirsts. Unfortunately, new wine is not considered to be of high quality.

Passivity

A major aspect of the first six lines is the speaker's passivity. The new lover is the one who is expected to lead, to satisfy hunger and thirst, and to be faithful. The speaker is led, fed, and, perhaps, forsaken. This passivity is stereotypically feminine, and the passivity of the speaker contrasts with the sinister remarks of the lover, to create a tone of foreboding anxiety compounded by passive inability to take action. Parker's poems frequently show a tough, cynical, world-wise woman who does not believe her own words, who longs for love though she knows intellectually that it is unlikely or impossible. This passivity helps to create tension in the poem, as well as a foreshadowing of tragedy to come. To know that an unacceptable outcome is arriving, and to be able to do nothing about it, is cause for great frustration. And yet this speaker seems committed to her new love, at least for the moment, and so is consciously doing things that she herself regards as against her own interests.

Reciprocity

It is significant that the poem is in the form of a dialogue in which questions are asked and immediately answered. The masculine figure is responsive, to some extent. This call-and-response reciprocity parallels the relationship that is shown here, a relationship of questions never satisfactorily answered, of emotional needs that are not met, and of hopes for a future that, from the start, will never be fulfilled. The feminine speaker seems sentimental and helpless, and the masculine respondent appears tough and unsympathetic. The diction is somewhat old-fashioned, with a word such as "awandering," which was not contemporary in 1928 but hearkens back to the language of the earlier English ballads. In this interchange, the woman speaks plainly, and the

man speaks in the language of archaic poetry. He hearkens to an old tradition, whereas, until the last two lines, the speaker is quite straightforward. There is a back-and-forth movement in the poem, yet it is not one of equality.

Barrenness

The poem deals with a love that appears destined to be fruitless in the most literal sense. The relationship has no direction, no emotional nourishment, and the poem promises that one of the partners should be heartbroken in time. There is no imagining the creation of a new life, whether a child or a career or a shared life experience. The affair is assumed to be bleak and barren. Parker never had any children, having had a miscarriage with her one pregnancy when she was in her forties. Why would one enter into such an affair? The joys of new love are not mentioned here. It is a poem of weary sophistication and the deadening, coarsening experience of having had too many new loves. It warns about the cost that casual relationships may exact on a woman's soul.

Ambiguity

Finally, the poem is ambiguous in at least two different ways. First is the ambiguity of the male voice. As mentioned above, the lover says things that are implicitly threatening. He does not directly tell her that she is the one who will suffer, but the inference is easily made. The second ambiguity is found in the last line. The thrust of the first three questions and their response indicates that the man will leave the woman, but this last question opens the possibility that it will be she who leaves him. Parker often ends her poems with an ironic reversal. This poem does not appear to have such a reversal, but upon reflection it becomes apparent that the "Last Question" of the title is in fact the woman's rejoinder to the man. She is tough enough to take on a dangerous liaison, and she recognizes that she may be hurt, but she is also strong enough and resourceful enough to dish out a little emotional pain if it comes to that. The poem is alternately self-pitying and assertive. It is this complex contradiction that is at the core of a number of Parker's poems.

Style

Rhyme

This poem is very conventional, consisting of two four-line stanzas, or quatrains. A stanza is the verse equivalent of a paragraph, and the quatrain is one of the most commonly used stanzas. The rhyme alternates, with the first and third lines of each stanza rhyming, and the second and fourth likewise rhyming. The rhyme in the first stanza falls on accented single-syllable words, which is known as masculine rhyme. In the second stanza, the words "forsaken" and "awaken" rhyme on two syllables, which is referred to as double rhyme. Rhyme on an unaccented syllable is known as feminine rhyme, and in this poem is only used in conjunction with the double rhyme. In this poem, the rhyme is unexceptional. It is not surprising, nor is it totally predictable.

Meter

Perhaps a more interesting point to make about this poem's style relates to its meter. Meter is the repetition of rhythm in a line. A meter is known by two words, the first is an adjective that describes the pattern of rhythm known as a foot, and the second is a noun that describes the number of times that pattern is repeated. The meter of this poem is generally trochaic hexameter, with some significant exceptions. The first line of each stanza is in trochaic pentameter. The trochee is a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that goes DA-da, with the stress on the first syllable. It is the inversion of the morefamiliar iamb, which goes, da-DA. For example, "Robert" is an example of a trochee, and "Denise" is an example of an iamb. Yet one must remember that the pattern is independent of individual words; instead, the pattern of sound is what is carried on.

This poem is very rhythmical, but it is far from metrically perfect. The first line, "New love, new love, where are you to lead me?" is an example of trochaic pentameter. Its rhythm goes like this: DA da DA da DA da DA da DA da. Nowhere else in this poem is she this close to her meter. Instead, she feels free to add an extra foot in the second line, or an extra syllable, filled by the word "and" in the line, "How are you to slake me, and how are you to feed me?" Such metrical irregularities are acceptable, and indeed occasionally necessary, but Parker is not strong at meter. Critics compared her unfavorably with her contemporary, Edna St. Vincent Millay, who honed her work into metrical precision. Yet the brevity of the form, its repetition, and its strong though slightly uneven rhythm make it memorable.

Historical Context

Technological and Social Changes

Parker achieved early fame during a period of American history often referred to as the Roaring Twenties. The United States had emerged victorious from World War I and was alone among the victors in not being exhausted and stunned by huge losses of their young men in battle. The mobilization for the war had further stimulated American industry and had employed, however briefly, many young women. The return of the veterans, women's suffrage, and the rapid technological and social changes of the period led to major experimentation in literature and lifestyles. The newly invented medium of radio broadcast jazz, the younger generation's preferred music, through the airwaves. Automobiles came within the reach of middle-class Americans and gave greater mobility and freedom to those who bought Henry Ford's machines, which continued to decline in price as the decade progressed. Although Prohibition was the law of the land and the sale and production of alcohol were outlawed by Constitutional amendment, many young, creative, and talented people openly defied the law, buying bootlegged liquor and consuming it at parties that shocked the older generation. Prosperity went on year after year, leading to a belief that the good times would continue indefinitely. It was a time of both optimism and cynicism, in which new ideas and new technologies and new styles of literature coexisted with new styles of fashion.

Modernism and Fame

The cultural life of the decade was dominated by modernism. American writers flocked to Paris, where they wrote books that were eagerly read by a large and literate audience. In this era before television, reading was a large part of many people's lives. Even the newspapers would publish poems, and many magazines included short stories, creating a large market for this genre. Novelists such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway were acquaintances of Parker's when they returned periodically to the States. Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot wrote poetry in new forms, rejecting the diction and rhyme of their predecessors. In music, jazz appealed to both the intellectuals and the mass market. African-American composers and performers contributed to the nation's cultural life in live performances and through phonograph recordings and radio airtime. Among Parker's circle in New York, an attitude of sophistication and cynicism was in vogue. Meanwhile, those outside the intellectual elite flocked to movie theatres and fostered the development of the motion picture industry and the growth of movie idols such as Rudolph Valentino and Mae West. Sports gained a larger place in American cultural life than in previous years, with the new media lauding such heroes as Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey. The new mass media made accomplished people into celebrities, and the hardbitten, hard-drinking men and women who wrote and loved and talked about all of it became public figures almost as much for their lifestyles as for their art.

Feminism and Parker's Appeal to Women

Parker's literature reflected many of the social changes that characterized the young century. Young women of her generation wore their hair bobbed and their dresses short, smoked cigarettes and were far more open than their parents' generation in discussing human sexuality. The ideas of Sigmund Freud, often in watered-down, popularized form, percolated through society, and human relationships, and indeed human identity, were seen through the prism of sex. Women had gained the vote, and many middle- and upper-class young women had benefited from a high level of education, particularly in the liberal arts. In an age in which opportunities for women were opening up somewhat but were still quite limited, many highly intelligent women went into the teaching profession, earning an independent income, albeit modest, and spending much of their time devoted to reading and writing. In an atmosphere of prosperity and rapid change, the divorce rate soared, and women began to assert their rights to equality in all matters, including equality in relationships with men. Though the majority of people remained conventional, the innovators of society more and more frequently included women who refused to abide by traditional standards. It was this social milieu in which Parker's stories and poems were rapidly acclaimed for their wit and irreverence and an attitude in which toughness and confidence were mixed with vulnerability and tenderness.

The Question of Values

Many of the writers and creative artists of the twenties, in their rejection of the Victorian values of their parents, came to question all values. They seemed to be nihilists and hedonists who believed in nothing but pleasure and the joys of company, drinking, laughter, and love affairs. In the years afterward, many of the participants in the cultural and literary life of the period looked back on the twenties as a time of insubstantial and shallow pleasures. The fall of the stock market in 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression put an end to the extravagant spirit of the twenties. Suddenly, responsibility, prudence, and concern with social values took center stage. Yet the decade produced more than its share of art and literature, and its protagonists looked back with fondness on the excesses of their youth, whereas others, such as Parker, lived on, moving farther and farther from the moment of her bright and promising youthful fame.

Critical Overview

Parker's critical reception has undergone several vicissitudes since she gained her first fame in the 1920s. In her heyday, Parker was celebrated and well known. As her life went on, she faded from public view, dying in virtual anonymity in 1967. She was as famous for her wit and her life as for her work itself. W. Somerset Maugham, writing in the book *Dorothy Parker* in 1944, said, "She seems to carry a hammer in her handbag to hit the appropriate nail on the head. She has a rare quickness of mind." That quickness, in poetry, in prose, and in the anecdotes of her life among the Algonquin Round Table, propelled her to notoriety. A reviewer in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1927, found Parker's poetry to be representative of her generation, saying "it is flapper verse. And as such it is wholesome, engaging, uncorseted and not devoid of grace." Yet, as Brendan Gill explained in his 1973 introduction to *The Portable Dorothy Parker*, "Mrs. Parker's reputation suffered . . . from the fact that the milieu that was her natural subject matter . . . underwent a sudden and overwhelming change during the Depression." The tastes of the times changed, and Parker's wit and verse seemed linked to a vanished lifestyle and to insubstantial concerns. Parker gave up poetry after her third volume, *Death and Taxes*, turning to well-paid Hollywood hack work in the 1940s. Her income was enhanced, but her reputation declined as her troubles with alcohol worsened. Gill remarks that "A protracted life-in-death is all the more striking in the case of writers who make a reputation in youth and then live on into age."

Parker has recently reemerged into public view. One reason for this new acceptance is her feminism. Parker wrote in a time in which women writers were seldom taken seriously, and in which women struggled to attain equality with their male peers. This struggle parallels the eternal antagonism between men and women. As Debra Beilke, writing as recently as 1996, said of the writer's endurance, "Dorothy Parker's serio-comic depictions of the tensions between the sexes and the agony of love are as relevant for today's readers as they were for those of her own time."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

Pool is a published poet and teacher of advanced placement and international baccalaureate senior English. In this essay, Pool relates Dorothy Parker's short poem to poetic traditions and to the social and sexual standards of the 1920s.

Dorothy Parker's poem "The Last Question" is exceedingly short, consisting of only eight lines. Such brevity, while characteristic of the poet, is nevertheless daunting to the reader who encounters the poem in isolation. It is quite clearly a love poem with an edge of worldly experience tempering the joys of a new love affair. Parker's poem, brief as it is, touches on the sense of wariness toward a new lover that reflects a kind of sophisticated and hardwon knowledge; it also may be understood through its connections to poetic tradition, the biography of the poet, and the relationship to the evolving social and sexual standards of the 1920s.

The poem is one written in two voices. One of those voices, presumably that of the poet, asks questions, and the other, presumably a male lover, responds in italicized lines. It is a call-and-response poem, one in which the masculine voice gives ambiguous and sinister replies, implying that the love will end badly and that the poet will be hurt by the affair. In reply to questions about where he is to lead her, how he is to feed her, and if he will forsake her, his replies are not at all promising. Then the poet asks the last question, the one for which there is no evident response.

The poem is not metrically perfect, having between five and as many as seven accented syllables in lines that alternate between iambic and trochaic without ever setting up a strong pattern. The diction, like many of Parker's poems, is quite simple, but in this poem she does not use contemporary slang and highly informal diction to humorous effect, primarily because this poem is not intended to be funny or sarcastic.

The poem was published in Parker's second book of verse, *Sunset Gun*, in 1928. By that time, Parker was quite well known as a member of New York's literary elite, notable for her quips and acerbic reviews and put-downs, for her quick wit as well as for her fashionable sophistication in matters of women's independence, particularly sexual independence that reflected the spirit of the time. As Arthur F. Kinney says of an earlier poem, "The New Love," this poem is also "essentially negative, its wit grounded in a rueful attitude, self-deprecation, and a world-worn cynicism." The poet is aware of danger and is flirting with self-destruction, yet she appears to be ready to continue a dangerous relationship. Implicitly critical of herself for her inability to find a stable and satisfactory lover, the poet seems to be a particularly self-aware moth who consciously swoops and circles around the flame of her never-to-be-satisfied desire. Rhonda S. Pettit, in a recent feminist work on Parker titled *A Gendered Collision*, states that "More often than not, the human bonds in Parker's poems fail to hold." The poet's own life appears to be intimately connected with her work. Edmund Wilson, writing in 1927 in the *New Republic* of her first collection of poetry, says that her poems "have the appearance of proceeding, not merely from the competent exercise of an attractive literary gift, but from a genuine necessity to write."

Kinney and Pettit and Brendan Gill, among others, have recognized in Parker's poetry the influence of A. E. Houseman. This poem is a dialogue that manifests what Kinney calls "dialogic unsettledness" and that hearkens to the question and response structure of a poem such as Houseman's "Is My Team Ploughing?" in which the voice of a dead man asks questions of his living friend, who seeks to reassure the departed that all is well up until the last stanza in which the friend implies that he has taken up with the dead man's girl.

The concluding lines of "The Last Question" appear to be less ironic than they in fact are. Although it seems that the lover is warning the poet against an affair because he is crooked, not supportive, and inconstant, it is also true that the poet herself might soon be the one to leave her lover and that he might be the heartbroken one "when dawn comes by." This is the kind of tough independence that Parker promoted in her public persona. In reading this poem, one must remember that Parker, unlike, say, Emily Dickinson, was a woman of considerable public acclaim, having written for major New York newspapers, been friends with leading literary lights, and, due to her wit and outrageous remarks, like Oscar Wilde before her, famous in great measure simply for being herself. Every poet creates for himself or herself a series of masks or persona. The word "persona" comes from the ancient Greek of the tragedies and is the word for mask, or, fittingly, the thing that sound comes through. Most poets, Dickinson excepted, seek fame, and Parker was famous while still young. She was only thirty-five when "The Last Question" was published, and she had by then won quite a reputation as a daring and sophisticated writer. As Brendan Gill says in his introduction to *The Portable Dorothy Parker*:

> These verses, which became something of a national
> rage, were thought to be strong stuff; brusque, bitter,
> and unwomanly in their presumed cynicism. They
> gave the average reader an impression of going recklessly
> far in asserting a woman's equal rights inside
> a sexual relationship, including the right of infidelity.

Parker seemed to be a spokeswoman for her generation of young women, a newly liberated group of would-be sophisticates who smoked cigarettes, listened to jazz, drank prohibited gin, and made out in automobiles. During the Great Depression and World War II and the Cold War that followed, these traits fell into disrepute, only to resurface in different garb during the 1960s. The great personal irony here is that Parker, who wrote of suicide and cynical love, fell from public view and lived on in obscurity until her death in 1967. Nevertheless, she was a popular poet at a time in which poetry was printed in newspapers for thousands of readers to see. Some poets write, imagining the fame that is to come; others, such as Shakespeare, seem to take their fame for granted; others, such as Parker, write to the adulation of masses of readers. When the subject of one's poetry is one's own life and experiences in love, it is a constant high-wire act to maintain both the fame and the poetry. In fact, Parker wrote one more book of poetry after *Sunset Gun*; it was titled *Death and Taxes*. Parker then abandoned the genre in favor of movie writing in Hollywood, short stories, and a number of plays.

As mentioned previously, numerous commentators find the influence of Housman in Parker. Brendan Gill says, bitingly, that "Her true literary mentor was that forbidding male spinster, A. E. Housman, who with the help of high intelligence, classical learning, and an exquisite ear, contrived to turn a reiterated whining into superior poetry." Others mention her relationship to Edna St. Vincent Millay, who was the most popular female poet in America during Parker's early career. Kinney has traced the influences farther back, to the ancient Roman poets Catullus and Martial and Horace. Roman literature is seldom read nowadays, but in the early twentieth century, Latin, along with its poets, was a standard subject for intellectually ambitious young people. Catullus is alone among major Roman poets in writing personal lyric poetry of urban consciousness, and Martial is well known for his satire. Kinney also finds affinities to Horace in Parker's work: "Structurally Horace's Satires are like Parker's, and often begin with a hyperbole, develop by antithetical ideas, end with a surprise, a twist."

Rhonda Pettit places Parker's poetic works in the context of nineteenth-century American poetry and especially foregrounds her role as a woman poet. Referring to the poem "Now at Liberty," Pettit remarks that it "follows, without mockery of form, a nineteenth-century style used by Thomas Hood in which conventional sentiment is countered by parenthetical phrases expressing an opposite feeling." We find the same antithesis in "The Last Question," in which concerns for protection and guidance and sustenance are countered by cryptic and darkly ambiguous responses. If the last lines of the poem do not have the biting turn and wit characteristic of other Parker poems, they smolder intensely and quietly, hinting of sorrows to come. Conventional in form and modernist in sensibility, with a voice both self-absorbed and self-pitying, tough and yet vulnerable, Parker's poem is best understood in its relationship to her life, to poetic traditions, and to the social and sexual milieu in which it was published.

Source: Frank Pool, Critical Essay on "The Last Question," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Potter, a writer of fiction and screenplays, teaches writing at the University of San Francisco. In this essay, Potter explains how Parker uses mock-serious language, poetic meter, and a series of questions and answers to beg the somber final response to her poem.

Upon a close reading of Dorothy Parker's "The Last Question," a few carefully crafted elements rise to the surface of what looks like a simple poem.

In the first stanza, the first two lines introduce the two speakers in the poem: the narrator and a lover in dialogue with each other. Asking a simple question, the narrator sounds like an innocent in the land of love: "New love, new love, where are you to lead me?

When the lover answers, however, archaic words like "marks" and "crooked" call attention to themselves, making the line an omen, for the road ahead of the two lovers will not be easy.

In the third line, the narrator asks again, but this time the tone of voice is changed: two short questions make it insistent.

The repetition of the phrase "new love" harks to a convention of love ballads in British Romantic poetry as do the lines that rhyme at the end according to a regular scheme, *abab*. Another example of love poetry, the light lyric was also often sung; Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins to Make Much of Time" (1674) is a well-known verse of this sort.

While love was a common theme in such ballads and poems, the path in front of young lovers was more often sunny, strewn with flower petals rather than the crooked path that Parker describes for the new lovers in her poem. In this way, Parker is mocking the earnestness of such poetry and the sincerity of love itself. To an even greater degree, the second query ridicules romantic love. It pointedly inquires how the narrator is to be slaked, revealing that Parker's narrator is not new to love, for "slake" refers not only to thirst, but also to sexual desire. In this line the narrator is also concerned about the body's basic need for food. Therefore, her narrator is wise to what is at stake in love, not merely emotions, but sex and survival. In a matter of a few brief lines, Parker has debunked not only the convention of the love poem, but romantic love as well.

Answering the narrator with frankness, the lover promises sour fruit and "sharp" wine, a dark, cruel answer indeed.

Although Parker once called her verse dated, some contemporaries, such as Somerset Maugham believed that "perhaps what gives her writing its peculiar tang is her gift for seeing something to laugh at in the bitterest tragedies of the human animal."

Thus, in the first stanza, after Parker establishes both a pattern of question-and-answer and the conventions of love poetry, she plays on them with irony and wit appropriate to her time. Just as she knew that red roses and bottles of wine accompany lovers when they meet, she knew that love poems were once written using a specialized poetic vocabulary, or diction, like Herrick's "Old Time is still a-flying," (from "To the Virgins to Make Much of Time") so she inserts a carefully placed "a-wandering" in the second stanza to both satirize the old poetic form and very cynically comment on modern love.

As with her diction and the pattern of questions, the poet also sets her rhythm and rhyme in motion in the first stanza. While lines rhyme at the end according to a straightforward *abab* scheme, the meter is more complicated. Using traditional metric scansion unearths another layer of Parker's poetic sophistication, for she breaks the rhythm for effect in a few significant places.

In the second line, the trochaic meter runs unevenly against the rhythm of the first, affecting the crookedness of the road ahead of the two lovers, its descending rhythm emphasizing the negative consequences of the lover's answer. Furthermore, in the fourth line, the penultimate word, "new," in a strong, spondaic foot, breaks the rhythm, emphasizing the sharpness of the last idea in the stanza, the pain that is to come to these new lovers.

Interestingly, the second stanza is the metric mirror of the first; that is, until the narrator figuratively is "awakened" in the penultimate line, and the punctuation, the dash, breaks the train of thought as well as the metrical pattern established in the first stanza, putting an end to the questioning. Thus, the poet intensifies her use of each of the poetic devices she has chosen to tell her lovers' brief tale.

In this stanza, Parker's narrator asks a third question that is a rhetorical because, in the case of the bitter experience of love in the first stanza, the answer is yes, yes, the narrator will be forsaken. Yet the narrator asks it, transforming her question into a querulous complaint; but when the lover responds, it is without admitting who will be guilty of "a-wandering," or straying. So, Parker's narrator will suffer, and the choice of the word "one" creates a kind of ambiguity that adds another form of cruelty to the others in the first stanza. Perhaps this ambiguous response gives the narrator pause to think, for the next line brings a halt to the persistent questions before resuming the questioning. The narrator sounds confused because before an answer comes, another question follows. Beginning the line with a question shifts the emphasis to the first syllable of the line, breaking the metrical pattern established in the first stanza, and emphasizes the word itself, so that the narrator demands an answer from the lover who gave a vague answer in the previous line. But, because the lover is not allowed to answer, the narrator's voice is isolated for even more poignant effect, a voice that alone asks the last question. Playing on another theme common to love poetry, Parker touches on time in her last answer, as the lovers' affair is to be as brief as one night, yet her choice of the metaphor of sleep and her diction, "dawn comes by," more effectively depicts the human condition. The sun rises and sets each day, and human beings passively watch it come and go, just as they do love. It is because Parker abandons the pattern of question and answer between the lovers, for two questions asked in quick

succession, that the mock-seriousness of the poem is dropped and the poem's last lines become very serious, indeed.

Brendan Gill, in his introduction to the 1973 edition of *The Portable Dorothy Parker*, writes that, taken together, her titles sum up her life. He continues

> Parker's ironic two stanzas stand as a testament to love in any age, in any century. By her deft play with a series of questions, mocking poetic diction, and poetic meter, she tells us that when love ends, someone will always be left with a broken heart in his or her hands.

Source: Mary Potter, Critical Essay on "The Last Question," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Bloom gives an overview of Parker's verse and concludes that Parker's best work remains the short, witty verse for which she is best known.

Parker's poems are highly restricted in scope and in depth. Although they become more technically versatile and controlled, Parker's subjects, personae, points-of-view, and major techniques remain constant throughout her work.

Parker's poetry, like her short stories, treats love, loneliness, and death. Loneliness and death, however, are usually variations on the motif of romantic love□exploited or exploitive, feigned, unreciprocated, betrayed, denied, abandoned. The relations between men and women in both her poetry and fiction are fleeting, false, and inevitably painful: "Scratch a lover and find a foe." In Parker's restricted milieu, women, as epitomized by her narrative personae, are doomed to unhealthy emotional dependence on men whose indifferent fickleness drives these females to the despair i plied in the macabre titles of Parker's books. Love relationships are bound to be superficial and ephemeral, based as they are on "dust-bound trivia" ("The Searched Soul"), appearance (eyes "slant and slow," hair "sweet to touch"□"Prophetic Soul"), and youth. If lovers swear their devotion is "infinite, undying," one or both is bound to be lying ("Unfortunate Coincidence"). The woman is more likely to be the victim of her passion, however, for "Woman lives but in her lord; / Count to ten, and man is bored" ("General Review of the Sex Situation"). Lovers are numerous, faceless, interchangeable: "I always get them all mixed up" ("Pictures in the Smoke").

Most of Parker's poems are presented from the point of view of a female persona who plays one of two typical roles. In one guise she is an abandoned lover, "brief and frail and blue" ("Sweet Violets"), smarting from the sense of unworthiness and the pain of rejection, trying to cope with her dismay and despair. Sometimes, in playing this role, she is weighted down by her "heavy freedom" ("Prisoner") and eager to give away her heart, "the wretched thing," "now to that lad, now to this" ("A Portrait"). At other times she despairs over her lost love, "screaming to die with the dead year's dead" ("Willow"), or she imagines herself dead, lying "cool and quiet," finding death a tranquil relief for the heart "that pain has made incapable of pain" ("Testament"). But the grave is not necessarily a quiet place, for she threatens to return as a ghost to haunt her former lover ("I Shall Come Back").

This persona is not convincing, partly because of the conventional language and stale images in which Parker presents the subject, partly because of its divergence from her own view of life as expressed in other contexts. Parker in the 1920s seemed as inconstant as the men whose fickleness her poetry condemns. In 1925 she had an affair with playwright Charles MacArthur, followed by affairs in 1926 with tobacco heir Seward Collins and in 1927 with businessman John Garrett. In 1928 she began a liaison with bisexual actor Alan Campbell which was to last the rest of her life; they were married from 1933 to 1947 and remarried in 1950. Always a hard drinker, she attended what Kinney calls innumerable "lavish and frenetic" parties, where her boisterous and

abrasive manner made her a lessthan- welcome guest. On hearing one hostess described as "outspoken," Parker rasped, "Outspoken by whom?" Parker's public persona, however, give credence to the other narrative personality in her poetry, a wise-cracking, savvy, jaded female who knows "it's always just my luck to get / One perfect rose" instead of "one perfect limousine" ("One Perfect Rose"). Worldly wise, she can also recognize the earmarks of a predatory male ("who murmurs that his wife / is the lodestar of his life"□"Social Note"), her own inconstancy ("I loved them until they loved me"□"Ballade of a Great Weariness"). She mocks virginity ("Parable for a Certain Virgin"), scorns sedate society ("Inseparable my nose and thumb"□ "Neither Bloody nor Bowed"), and will eagerly engage "in fun and such" until 3 A.M.□for "I shall stay the way I am / Because I do not give a damn" ("Observation"). The hallmarks of this persona are "laughter and hope and a sock in the eye" ("Inventory").

Like the men Parker's melancholy persona laments, this worldly wise persona is bound to be "spectacularly bored" with a constant lover ("On Being a Woman"). If she ever succumbs to sentiment, such as preferring one who is "sudden and swift and strong" to a wealthy wooer, she undermines it with a cynical punch line□"Somebody ought to examine my head!" ("The Choice"). She relishes the calculated insult ("I turn to little words□so you, my dear / Can spell them out"□ "Little Words") as much as the imagined deaths of her adversaries, shot with a "shiny gun" ("Frustration")□ and sometimes, even the longed-for deaths of her lovers ("I wish somebody'd shoot him□ "Love Song").

The two personae are intermingled in Parker's books of poetry, but the cynic prevails, partly because of Parker's stylistic techniques. Once conditioned, readers expect a witty riposte or a slangy word ("here's my strength and my weakness, gents"□"Ballade at Thirty-Five") to shift the poem from seriousness to satire, as indeed it often does. Though anticipated, the slang startles, as in "Coda" ("For art is a form of catharsis / And love is a permanent flop"), and provides laughter in what might otherwise have been serious contexts. Even if Parker meant some of her poems to be taken seriously, as individually they might be ("How shall I be mating . . . Living for a hating□Dying of a love?"□"The Dark Girl's Rhyme"), the flippant, cynical persona and her satiric or ironic language establish the prevailing comic tone of Parker's collected verse. Moreover, the language of the poetry that purports to be serious is predictable, anachronistic ("what shallow boons suffice my heart"), and banal: seas are "stormy," rain "drops softly," "withering flowers" denote an absent or lost lover; the rejected maiden is "a-crying," or "sleeping chastely," or mourning "whenever one drifted petal leaves the tree." Thus Parker's poetic techniques□ far more distinctive and striking in comic than in serious poetry□reinforce the impression that the verse is more an exercise in verbal wit than the interpretation of an authentic emotion or experience.

Parker's lyrics, all short, are written primarily in simple iambic quatrains or couplets ("Men seldom make passes / At girls who wear glasses"□ "News Item"). Although she occasionally experimented with ballads, sonnets, and other forms, her poetry on the whole lacks the formal complexity, structural finesse and variations, and metaphorical ingenuity that add interest and stature to memorable love poetry by John Donne, William Shakespeare, John Keats, Emily Dickinson, and Parker's contemporaries, Elinor Sylie and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Kinney has favorably compared Parker's use of meter

and line to Horace, Martial, Catullus, and Heinrich Heine, among others; he embeds Parker's work in a classical tradition. Although she may have read these authors, the more immediate influence on her verse appears to have some from the Algonquin Round Table. The verses of Parker and Franklin P. Adams (author of such whimsies as "Give me the balmy breezes! .. . / Wind on my cheek and hair! / And, while we're on the topic, / Give me the air.") exhibit control, compression precise diction, and an irreverent fondness for puns, which perhaps are all one can expect of light verse. Contemporary reviewers recognized Parker's poetry for what it was, with Louis Kronenberger predicting, "she will survive not only as the author of some firstrate light verse but also as a valuable footnote of the Twenties, out of whose slant on existence that light verse sprang." Yet the public enjoyed her poems, and her books were best-sellers.

In the 1920s Parker collaborated with the Algonquin wits on an ill-fated Broadway revue, *Chauve-Souris* (1922), and in 1924 she and Elmer Rice wrote *Close Harmony*, a predictable comedy of adultery, also short-lived. In the 1930s and 1940s Parker also collaborated, sometimes with Alan Campbell, on several film scripts, including *A Star is Born* (1937), *Smash Up* (1947), and *The Fan* (1949), based on *Lady Windemere's Fan* (1892), by Oscar Wilde. With her film collaborator Ross Evans she wrote a play, *The Coast of Illyria* (1949), about the tortured lives of Charles and Mary Lamb□a failure in its only production, a three-week run in Dallas. Another play, with collaborator Arnaud d'Usseau, was *The Ladies of the Corridor* (1953), three case studies of life-in-death among elderly women. Although George Jean Nathan named it the best play of 1953, other critics disliked it, and it closed after a six-week Broadway run.

Parker's intermittent alcoholism and progressive writing anxiety (she procrastinated on assignments for months at a time) made her later work sporadic and unreliable; only rarely did the glimmer of her former wit illuminate its somberness. She will nevertheless remain known as a writer of comic verse, to which applies the judgment she herself made of the performance of a famous actress, who "ran the gamut of emotions from A to B." Her best verse succeeds within this restricted compass.

Source: Lynn Z. Bloom, "Dorothy Parker," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 45, *American Poets, 1880-1945, First Series*, edited by Peter Quartermain, Gale Research, 1986, pp. 303-05.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Grant examines the various influences on and styles of Parker's poetry.

Parker's scathing wit was likely sharpened by the two years she spent under pressure at *Vogue* forced to dream up witty lines to decorate the years' changing fashions. But the epigrammatic clarity and precision of her style was forged, as Arthur Kinney has shown, from her study and imitation of classical Latin poets begun at Miss Dana's school and perfected by her reading of classical imitators among her contemporaries. Roman wit suffuses her own, abundantly demonstrated in her poetry. From Catullus, by way of Housman, she learned to express the disappointment of love in deceptively simple, conversational, yet elegantly polished and succinct songs that at their best strike the reader as both unabashedly confessional and ironically distanced in tone. Hence, "Summary":

Every love's the love before
In a duller dress.
That's the measure of my lore□
Here's my bitterness:
Would I knew a little more
Or very much less!
From Horace, by way of the Horatian imitations
of Eugene Field and F. P. Adams, she learned
to contrive cocky but concise mock odes that build
upon initial hyperboles and end with an ironic
flourish, such as in "Godspeed":
Oh, seek, my love, your newer way;
I'll not be left in sorrow.
So long as I have yesterday,
Go take your damned tomorrow!

From Martial, by way of the English epigram tradition, she learned the severely compressed economy of hyperrestricted form, as shown in "The Flaw in Paganism":

Drink and dance and laugh and lie,
Love, the reeling midnight through,
For tomorrow we shall die!
(But, alas, we never do.)

From them all, she learned wry Roman resignation, a deeply pagan sense of man's, and woman's, limitations. And from other female poets, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Elinor Wylie, both steeped in the Roman poets, she acquired fluency in longer forms, such as the sonnet, and, through their work, found her own personal voice. Hence, "On Being a Woman":

Why is it, when I am in Rome,
I'd give an eye to be at home,
But when on native earth I be,
My soul is sick for Italy?

And why with you, my love, my lord,
Am I spectacularly bored,
Yet do you up and leave me—then
I scream to have you back again?

These classical and modern influences pervade Parker's collections of poetry, beginning with *Enough Rope* (1926). This slim volume was a sensational best-seller, especially for a book of poems. Throughout, she shows herself to be technically accomplished in several poetic modes: the lyric, the Horatian ode, ballade, ballad stanza, sonnet, epigram, and even epitaph. A classicist, she seems to relish the challenge to adhere to the requisites of traditional form. Her prevailing subject is love's labor's lost (or threatened loss) usually examined at the moment when initial disappointments have for the woman passed into rueful, self-deprecating humor, as in "One Perfect Rose":

A single flow'r he sent me, since we met.
All tenderly his messenger he chose;
Deep-hearted, pure, with scented dew still wet—
One perfect rose.

I knew the language of the floweret;
"My fragile leaves," it said, "his heart enclose."
Love long has taken for his amulet
One perfect rose.

Why is it no one ever sent me yet
One perfect limousine, do you suppose?
Ah no, it's always just my luck to get
One perfect rose.

Although a man of limited sensitivity is politely but justly abused, as well as the speaker herself for foolishly awaiting his overtures—that curtailed refrain damns with faint praise—Parker is really attacking the sentimental proprieties which hold the speaker, as well as all women, in her proper place. Hence, she knowingly mimics the cloying cliches that embalm true affections: "deephearted, pure, with scented dew," "My fragile leaves . . . "—the trite "language of the floweret" which decorates florist shop missives and greeting cards. The speaker's wish for a more functional gift ("one perfect limousine") nicely betrays the transparencies of her suitor's polite evasions, just as the poem itself burlesques trite romantic lyrics. The subtle enemy of love is hollow conventions hypocritically preserved in insincere expressions. In "Unfortunately Coincidence," the enemy is the seductive vocabulary of vows:

By the time you swear you're his,
Shivering and sighing,
And he vows his passion is
Infinite, undying□
Lady, make a note of this:
One of you is lying.

In "Comment," it is the luring promises of songs:

Oh, life is a glorious cycle of song.
A medley of extemporanea;
And love is a thing that can never go wrong;
And I am Marie of Roumania.

Sometimes, Parker succumbs herself to romantic cliches, as in "A Well-Worn Story," which seems only to be itself well-worn□the posture affected, the cadences mechanical, the images sentimental:

Together we trod the secret lane
And walked the muttering town.
I wore my heart like a wet, red stain
One the breast of a velvet gown.

When she dwells lugubriously upon the plight of the spurned woman, rather than wrench from sorrow some momentary triumph in mordant wit, Parker falls back upon the polite jargon of Housman and Millay at their worst.

Parker's second slim volume, *Sunset Gun* (1928), was nearly as popular as her first. She continued to experiment in traditional forms, including a daring cycle of epigrams, "A Pig's-Eye View of Literature," a sort of barnyard glance up at the classics. Lesser luminaries naturally inspire the truer lampoon:

Upon the work of Walter Landor
I am unfit to write with candor.
If you can read it, well and good;
But as for me, I never could.

She continues, too, her well-informed assault upon empty vows and false promises peddled in popular songs and whispered in attentive ears. In "Theory," a weary woman knocks her head for the dumbness of her heart:

Into love and out again,
Thus I went, and thus I go.
Spare your voice, and hold your pen□
Well and bitterly I know
All the songs were ever sung,
All the words were ever said;

Could it be, when I was young,
Someone dropped me on my head?

In "For a Lady Who Must Write Verse," Parker attacks vacuous but facile poets:

Let your rhymes be tinsel treasures,
Strung and seen and thrown aside,
Drill your apt and docile measures
Sternly as you drill your pride.

Parker can be deeply reflective too; when she writes about the dichotomy between the claims of the heart and those of the head her wit becomes startlingly metaphysical. The exquisitely wrought "Interior" echoes Emily Dickinson, save for the final line:

Her mind lives in a quiet room,
A narrow room, and tall,
With pretty lamps to quench the gloom
And mottoes on the wall.

There all the things are waxen neat
And set in decorous lines;
And there are posies, round and sweet,
And little, straightened vines.

Her mind lives tidily, apart
From cold and noise and pain,
And bolts the door against her heart,
Out wailing in the rain.

The wailings of *Enough Rope* diminish in *Sunset Gun*, but so too does the cockiness, the disarming whimsy, the wry skepticism. By the time *Death and Taxes* (1931), Parker's sadness had given way to bitter cynicism, that of a mind which had settled for the only certainties, the two of her title. In "Cherry White," the humor, such as it is, is macabre:

I never see that prettiest thing□
A cherry bough gone white with Spring□
But what I think, "How gay t'would be
To hang me from a flowering tree."

She continued, however, to experiment with traditional forms, including another cycle of epigrams, all shadowed by a funereal title, "Tombstones in the Starlight." The best retain a glimmer of saving wit, as in "Sanctuary":

My land is bare of chattering folk;
The clouds are low along the ridges,
And sweet's the air with curly smoke
From all my burning bridges.

The wit fades in "The Lady's Reward" as the cocky smirk resolves into a despairing grimace:

Never serious be, nor true,
And your wish will come to you□
And if that makes you happy, kid,
You'll be the first it ever did.

Parker continued to linger over grief, despair, and death, too close to her own experience, as her stories better revealed. When she published her three collections of poetry in one volume in 1936, with some deletions and five additions, she entitled it with the aptly funereal phrase, *Not So Deep As A Well*□from Mercutio's sardonic quip (*Romeo and Juliet*, act 3).

In an article written in 1937, Parker disagreed with the belief "that ridicule is the most effective weapon"; as she put it, "there are things that never have been funny, and never will be. And I know that ridicule may be a shield, but it is not a weapon." Ridicule, so exquisitely phrased in her best poetry, was her sharpest weapon against proper manners and hypocritical observances; but the acerbic personae who speak her mind also know they are not superior to the dumbest of either sex. In that knowledge, wit becomes a defense, first against pain and then against despair. The contradictions inherent in being a bright woman vexed by a heart yearning for what the mind must mock gives uncommon subtlety to her verse and distinguishes her poetry from the glut of flapper verse of the 1920s. Her technical skill in translating classical forms into a modern idiom and the complexity of her wit prompted Arthur Kenney to call Parker "the best epigrammatic poet in our country, in this century."

Source: Thomas Grant, "Dorothy Parker," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 11, *American Humorists, 1800-1950, Part 2: M-Z*, edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, Gale Research, 1982, pp. 371-74.

Adaptations

Dorothy Parker: Selected Stories (1995), read by Elaine Steich and distributed by Penguin Audio books, gives an overview of some of Parker's best-known stories in an entertaining format.

Lauren Bacall Reads "Big Blond," (1995) from Durkin Hayes Publishing features the famous actress reading Parker's short story.

Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle (1994), starring Jennifer Jason Leigh and Campbell Scott and directed by Alan Rudolph for Fine Line Features, is available in videotape and DVD and features contemporary actors and actresses dramatizing the life and times of Dorothy Parker and her Round Table friends and acquaintances.

Topics for Further Study

Find a book or website that contains quotations from Oscar Wilde, and write a short poem that uses his witty lines as a concluding line or few lines in the manner that Dorothy Parker wrote her poems.

Dorothy Parker began her career writing reviews in a regular column. Locate a columnist whose work you appreciate, either in a newspaper or on a website. Collect several columns, and write a column in which you try to imitate that person's style.

Write and perform a short skit in which one character uses wit or puns to put down a second person in the way that Dorothy Parker did.

At the same time Dorothy Parker was becoming famous, a group of outstanding African-American writers and composers were involved in the Harlem Renaissance. Write an imaginary dialogue between Dorothy Parker and Langston Hughes or another member of the Harlem Renaissance.

Research the twenties in America, paying special attention to the role of women. Write a short essay in which you explain why Dorothy Parker appealed to young women of her generation.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: New technologies such as radio, the automobile, and motion pictures enhance communication and build a national community.

Today: New technology such as the Internet, wireless communications, and broadband information technology enhance communication and help create a global community.

1920s: Women are able to vote for the first time, though they do not yet find themselves in places of political influence.

Today: Women are represented at all levels of state, local, and federal government except the presidency. Women are in the Congress, the Cabinet, and the Supreme Court.

1920s: African-American writers, composers, and performers flock to New York City, leading to the Harlem Renaissance, the first sustained literary and artistic movement of African Americans in a predominantly segregated society.

Today: African-American writers, musicians, actors, and entertainers are among the highestpaid members of their professions, appealing to all racial groups.

1920s: Jazz music permeates the culture of young adults by means of the radio, phonograph records, and live performances.

Today: Hip-hop, rap, techno, and other musical forms are disseminated through Internet file sharing, CDs, and live performances.

1920s: Books by famous modernist authors such as James Joyce are banned in several American cities and cannot to be shipped in the U.S. mail.

Today: Except for some types of pornography, government-sanctioned censorship is a thing of the past.

1920s: The stock market rises, and prosperity leads to an atmosphere of optimism and risktaking, which changes after the stock market crash of 1929.

Today: Economic exuberance of the last decade of the twentieth century is replaced by anxiety as the stock market plunges after the turn of twenty-first century.

What Do I Read Next?

Frederick Lewis Allen's informal history *Only Yesterday*, published originally in 1931 and reprinted often since, is a wonderfully informative and easily read account of the era. It should be available in most libraries.

Arthur F. Kinney's *Dorothy Parker, Revised* (1998) is highly informative, with biographical and critical insights. There is also a previous, unrevised volume, published in 1973.

Since Parker's life and reputation were a big part of her fame, looking into a biography sheds light on the writer. Marion Meade's biography, *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell Is This?* (1988) is an easy read.

The Portable Dorothy Parker (1973) is a standard collection that includes short stories, poetry, and newspaper reviews written by Parker. This is probably the best single-volume source of her work, and it is easy to locate.

Rhonda Pettit's *A Gendered Collision: Sentimentalism and Modernism in Dorothy Parker's Poetry and Fiction* (2000) may be harder to locate, but it gives a good overview of a feminist approach to Parker's work and connects it with nineteenth-century traditions in women's literature. Pettit's book avoids trendy literary jargon but is a serious, scholarly effor

Further Study

Abels, Jules, *In the Time of Silent Cal: A Retrospective History of the 1920s*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969.

Although not primarily concerned with literary events, this book provides a basic understanding of the social, political, and technological changes of the period of Parker's early fame.

Frewin, Leslie, *The Late Mrs. Dorothy Parker*, Macmillan, 1986.

This is one of several good biographies of Parker's life and works, well-suited for an interested beginner.

Parker, Dorothy, *The Collected Poetry of Dorothy Parker*, Modern Library, 1959.

This single volume contains selections from all of Parker's collections and shows her development as a poet over a number of years.

□, *Sunset Gun*, Sun Dial Press, 1941.

This is Parker's second collection of verse. It contains "The Last Question," which can be seen in its original context.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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