# Late and Deep Study Guide

## Late and Deep by Paul Celan

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# Introduction

Paul Celan's poem "Late and Deep" has been translated into English by John Felstiner and included in the collection *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*. It is a relatively early work from the poet's career, originally published in 1952 in *Poppy and Memory*, as it was called in English. This poem is a disturbing one, dealing as it does with the recent memory of the Holocaust, of Jewish history through the ages, and of the constant pressure for conversion to Christianity that Jews have faced from ancient and medieval times up until the present. It is a poem that seems to affirm an oath or prayer but that ultimately undercuts its own promises. The poem is characterized by allusions to Christian and Jewish scripture and history, and it seems to beckon forward and backward, from the time of the Exodus from Egypt, up to the Holocaust, in a never-ending saga of oppression, faith, and the futility and the barrenness of that faith. Celan is a Jew, writing in the German language of his people's oppressors, but he is a Jew who has lost faith in a personal God, making this poem bitter in its renunciation of hope.

# Author Biography

On November 23, 1920, Paul Antschel was born in Czernowitz, Romania, which at that time was the easternmost province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was the only son of Leo and Friederike Antschel, a Jewish couple. After high school he studied medicine briefly in Tours, France, and returned to Czernowitz in 1939, where he studied romance languages and literature. In 1940, the Soviet Union annexed his hometown, and the following year the Germans invaded. His parents were deported in 1942 to a concentration camp, where his father died of disease and his mother was executed by a shot to the back of the head. Celan later wrote many poems that seem to refer to his mother; he only mentions his father once in all his work.

Antschel was not deported, though he was sent to a forced labor camp. In 1943, he returned to Czernowitz, which had been captured and occupied by the Russians. Toward the end of the war, he worked in Bucharest as a translator and editor. By 1947, he had taken his pen name, Paul Celan, which contained the letters of the Romanian version of his name, Ancel. He used the name Celan exclusively for the rest of his life.

In 1948, Celan moved to Paris, where he would live the rest of his life. He wrote poems in German and occasionally in French. The book that first gained him attention was his second collection, *Poppy and Memory*, in which "Late and Deep" appears. His reputation as a poet continued to grow, and he was awarded a number of literary prizes for his work in the German language, though he remained relatively unknown in France. In 1969, he visited Israel, years later than other men of his generation and stature usually did. Filled with despair and guilt, in April 1970 he apparently drowned himself in the Seine in Paris. A posthumous collection of poetry was published in 1971. His work has continued to attract critical attention in Germany, France, and the United States.

# Plot Summary

## Lines 1—2

This poem contains some rhythms in the original German, but it is not highly metered. It is, instead, an example of modernist, free-verse poetry that does away with rhyme and meter. The lines are as long or short as the phrases they convey, rather than being of a unified length. Many of the lines are relatively long, and in both the German original and in the English translation are end-stopped, which means that a reader should pause after each line, except for the one line ending with "dreamless sleep," which should be read continuously into the following line "and flourish the white hair of time." The end-stopped lines provide a choppiness to the poem and also serve to foreground the poem's images.

The images themselves are striking, almost surrealistic. Speech appears both spiteful and golden, and "the apples of the mute" makes an inability to speak palpable as a fruit. Celan is noted for the care with which he picks words, as well as for the ambiguity of his allusions. In the opening two lines, which comprise two complete sentences, speech is contrasted with non-speech. A night begins, and this night seems to be the darkness descending on the Jewish people. Apples are traditionally associated with Adam and Eve and their fall from grace, which in Christian theology is the root of original sin. Though Jewish, Celan alludes frequently to Christian ideas and beliefs.

## Lines 3—12

In the next few lines, the English translation reads, "we do a thing." The original German for "thing" is *Werk*, a word that also can mean "the workings of God." This "thing" is "gladly left to one's star." In a poem such as this, a word like "gladly," when applied to the speakers, is bitter. As gladness is far from the emotion of this poem, one must assume the word is used either with irony or as a desperate and deliberate falsehood. The "we," representing the Jewish people of Europe, are standing in "our lindens' autumn." The linden is a characteristic European tree, and the Jews, the "ardent guests from the South," are in the autumn of their time in Europe, and facing the winter of sacrifice.

The word "swear" is used four times before the end of the stanza. Whatever the difficult ambiguities of the poem, it is clear that some kind of ritual oath is in progress. It is an oath to "Christ the New," to the New Testament whose proponents the Jewish people have resisted for centuries. Now, inexplicably, the speakers, presumably the Jews, are willing to swear by Christ, to swear to the world, and to swear aloud. Furthermore, these oaths are taken "gladly," a word that occurs twice in the first stanza.

## Lines 13—18

No Jew can swear such oaths and remain Jewish. Hence the short line, "They cry: Blasphemy!" To swear by Christ is to blaspheme the God of Moses. The German text may also be translated "They cry: you (plural) blaspheme!" This second-person plural is the counterpoint of the "we" in the first stanza. The speakers are blasphemers. Who, then, is the "They" who cry? Although there is no definite referent, it is possible that Celan is talking about Jewish monotheism and the cultural and religious history that has manifested itself in the "white hair of time." It is a specific kind of guilt that afflicts the speakers of the poem. They have sworn a blasphemous oath and, as Celan will say at the end of the poem, for nothing. Their culture calls them to account.

Or are they speaking to the Germans? Or, in a surreal nightmare where identities shift, is he speaking simultaneously to Jews and Germans, to anyone who might listen? Though it seems that Jews would be more likely than Germans to accuse the speakers of blasphemy, subsequent lines indicate a shift of attention toward the speakers' German oppressors. Amy Colin, writing in *Paul Celan: Holograms of Darkness*, has said that "Celan hides both 'I' and 'You' behind various masks, destabilizing the harmonious unity within a lyric voice and within consciousness." At the center of the poem, the speakers acknowledge their guilt, but ask "who cares?" Then comes a long line in which the white meal (or flour) of the Promise has been ground "in the mills of death." That industrialized imagery depicts the routine technological and bureaucratic machinery of the Holocaust. The mills of death grind up human bones in violation of every Promise (significantly capitalized here) and "you" present the unholy offering to the brothers and sisters, the closest and dearest, of the Jewish speakers. This is a hideous parody of the Jewish Passover or the Christian communion, perhaps of both at once.

Then, in a single line, Celan repeats the strange, haunting image. "We flourish the white hair of time." Like a flag brandished in defiance, this dreamlike and disturbing image of age and time evokes the ancient history of the Jewish people, a people who are heirs to a long tradition, and who are also running out of time.

## Lines 19—26

In the penultimate stanza, the poet acknowledges the warning of blasphemy and employs repetition to restate that the oath-takers "know it full well." There is a conscious resignation and desperation in this poem, and an acceptance of guilt. The Jews were infamously accused of guilt in the death of Christ, and seem to be accepting a similar kind of guilt in swearing to "Christ the New." The poem builds to a crescendo of imagery and rhetoric. Ominous signs are invoked, for they are accepted along with guilt. The "gurgling" sea makes the sound of a slit throat, and the "armored windblast of conversion" is militaristic and religious at the same time. A day of midnights is an oxymoron, but darkness falls upon the earth as the speakers pray for something that "never yet was."

Here, Celan turns the thrust of the poem against itself, and denies the possibility of redemption even through desperate, blasphemous oaths and the acceptance of guilt. For the image of what "never yet was" is a man who comes forth from the grave. In other words, there is no hope for the Jews, not even in Christ, because a man coming forth from the grave "never yet was." It is futile to convert. In any event, during the Holocaust the Jews were not given the option of converting to Christianity, though in other ages this act had sometimes prevented their murder. The speakers of this ironic and bitter oath call upon signs and portents, and especially they call upon the central mystery of Christianity, the resurrection of Christ, but they cannot believe a man has ever come forth from his death.

## Line 27

Last words of poems are often significant. Celan ends his impassioned oath or prayer with the word "grave." It is with that word, which names the destination of all men, of all speakers, of the martyred and murdered Jews, that Celan falls silent.

# Themes

## Conversion

One of the important themes in this poem is the desperate resort to conversion by the Jews. Many times over the centuries, Jews have been forced to choose between betraying their faith and losing their lives, as well as the lives of their families. Sometimes they choose death, and at other times they convert externally, hoping to keep their faith alive in secret. It was often the function of the Inquisition to ferret out these secret Jews. Whatever choice they made, the Jews faced anguish, and their forced conversions were always suspect, just as they cut Jews off from their own co-religionists. This poem deals with a defiant and doomed choice to convert. Conversion is thus a more painful and serious matter to Jews than it might be to members of some other religions.

## Guilt

Celan's life and work show the influence of guilt. Perhaps this experience is an example of "survivor's guilt," which may have led to his suicide, like that of his contemporary Primo Levi. There are several levels of guilt in this poem. First, the poet himself may feel guilt that he has survived the Holocaust when so many, including his parents, have perished. Second, the speakers, those who swear a blasphemous oath, revel in their guilt, saying that they do not care about it. They challenge the elements, the moral and physical order of the universe, challenging the sea and the "armored windblast of conversion," even the fundamental basis of time with a "day of midnights." Third, there is a collective guilt that was attributed to the Jews by Christians, who blamed them for the death of Christ. This guilt has a long and sordid history, and has endured from early Christian times up to the present. In Celan's poem, the guilt is accepted, along with the guilt of the apostasy of the oath-takers. It is not absolutely clear whether the guilt is personal, internalized, or external, but in any event it is pervasive, and a central theme of the poem.

## Irony

Irony can mean many things. Fundamentally, irony is a recognition of the difference between reality and our expectations. Three major types of irony are situational irony, dramatic irony, and verbal irony. In the first type, we find that an action leads to a result contrary to what we can foresee. In the second type, we observe others and watch how they misunderstand the world and each other. In verbal irony, we recognize that what people say is not what they mean, and yet they are not lying or trying to deceive us. Celan uses a special kind of irony in this poem. He sets his reader up to expect that the speakers of the poem are taking some sort of conversion oath, or are in some way praying to Christ and violating their Jewish faith. He moves from simple promises to

grander and more portentous speech, invoking awesome miracles until he gets to the miracle that undercuts all previous speech. His assertion that no man has "come forth from the grave" lets careful readers know that all the previous language was not meant in the way it has seemed. If he swears on behalf of what he knows has never come, he cannot have meant his oath in the way it first seemed.

## Despair

How does one write poetry after the Holocaust? How can a man see the mass murder of his people, endure the death of his mother and father, and continue to be a sensitive human being who continues to write? How does one write in German, the language of the murders? All these are existential questions a poet such as Celan has to face. There is no escape from a deep sense of despair, mixed with guilt. All of Celan's work is shaped by the sense of despair. He seems sometimes to hold out the promises of religion□in this poem, of the promise that the Jews can convert themselves into something that they are not. Whenever he offers hope, though, he immediately refutes it. Celan's poetry is a testament to deep despair.

# Style

## Repetition

One of the chief characteristics of poetry is its repetition. This poem repeats several phrases and elements. "We swear" is repeated four times. This repetition emphasizes the ritualized and formal nature of the oath being taken. All these examples are from the first stanza. The swearing is consecutive and repetitive. In the middle of the poem are several acknowledgments of "We've known it," and "Known it long since." In this sequence, however, the repetition is interrupted by other imagery, until it occurs one more time, in the penultimate stanza, "We know it full well," which provides a transition to the repeated guilt motif, which in turn transforms itself from "let the guilt come" to "let come what never yet was" to the ultimate line, "Let a man come forth from the grave." Thus, Celan uses at least three distinctive methods of repetition. He repeats "swear" in a compact section of his poem; he repeats "known" twice in one stanza, then comes back to it in another stanza. Finally, he links the repetition of "guilt" with "let come" in his powerful concluding lines.

## Surrealism

Surrealism is a twentieth-century movement in art and literature that tried to express the operation of the subconscious mind. Surrealism uses dream-like imagery and often juxtaposes harshly jarring, disturbing, or incongruous imagery. In art, Salvador Dali is often associated with this movement. Paul Celan wrote an early essay on the surrealist Edgar Jené, indicating his interest in the movement. Several aspects of "Late and Deep" show surrealistic influences. Most prominent is the perplexing and dreamlike "we flourish the white hair of time." The German verb means "to brandish" in English. The image is nightmarish, as human hair functions as an object, a totem, or a flag. Similarly, the stair in the water, birds to a shoe, and the white meal "You grind in the mills of death" all have a surrealistic and nightmarish quality.

## Allusion

In general, an allusion is an indirect reference or hint to something outside the work in which it occurs. It can be a reference to history, to events surrounding the composition of a poem, to a song or cultural practice, to another work of literature, or, indeed, to almost anything else. Many students have problems catching allusions, and those problems are magnified by the work of a poet such as Celan. Even academic critics find themselves unsure of the meaning of Celan's allusions. Some things, however, are clear enough. Celan was well-read in both Jewish and Christian tradition, and he alludes to them both in his poetry. This poem seems to allude to the parting of the Red Sea or perhaps even the Great Flood, and to the condemnation of Christ when, according to the New Testament, the Jewish mob took responsibility for Christ's execution on

themselves and their children, and also to the darkness during the daytime that accompanied Christ's death on the cross. Additionally, "Spiteful like golden speech" might be an allusion to Hitler. It must be remembered that some allusions can be precisely attributed to the poet, and others are suggestive and indirect. This poem has some very clear allusions and some that are less certain.

# Historical Context

"Late and Deep" is, very clearly, a poem that is a response to the Holocaust, or as many Jewish scholars have come to call it, *Shoah*, which is Hebrew for "catastrophe." It is difficult to grasp the enormity of this crime against humanity. Tens of millions of human beings died during World War II, some by disease and hunger, others by bombing, shooting, and other acts of warfare, but the Holocaust refers to the intentional, deliberate, and systematic deportation and murder of European Jews under the control of Nazi Germany and its puppet states. There are many resources for learning about the Holocaust; historical documentation is plentiful, the account of this period is presented in schools, and in some communities survivors of the Holocaust are still alive to tell their stories. In all the history of human evil, the Holocaust is different from other wicked events in that the Jews were singled out for their racial characteristics, which meant that there was no way for them to submit or cooperate with their conquerors, options that most other people have used, even in defeat. Instead, there was a conscious effort to exterminate the entire Jewish race. The methods used by the Nazis were thorough, routine, and bureaucratic. Approximately six million Jews were killed during the Holocaust. Other populations besides Jews, including Gypsies, homosexuals, and communists, were targeted, but the racial violence against the Jews was central to the Nazi regime's ideology and purpose.

After the fall of the Third Reich in 1945, the evidence of the Nazi crimes became public. Almost no Jews remained in countries such as Germany, Poland, and Romania. Celan, like so many people of his time, became a displaced person. He moved between the Soviet Union, Romania, and Austria before settling in Paris. This poem was published within seven years after the end of the war. Many European Jews abandoned the lands of their birth and took up new lives in the state of Israel, founded in 1948. Others made their lives in nations such as France, Australia, or the United States.

Dealing with the Holocaust as a literary matter was very difficult. It has been famously remarked that after Auschwitz, writing poetry is barbaric. Paul Celan, on the other hand, used all the tools of modernist literature to write poetry that did not succumb to sensationalism or emotionalism. In his own way, Celan offered his readers a kind of verse that was daunting and haunting, allusive and elusive. His postwar years were spent in an era in which many thinkers and artists abandoned the certainties of previous generations and committed themselves to philosophies such as existentialism, which was particularly influential in France as Celan began his poetic career. Clarise Samuels, in the conclusion to her book *Holocaust Visions: Surrealism and Existentialism in the Poetry of Paul Celan* says that, "Celan has depicted an existentialist universe described artistically in surrealist terms. The purpose of this vision is to shock and destroy so that society can renegotiate its structures, its values, and basic social relationships." As other Jewish writers looked with hope at the birth of the state of Israel, Celan and others, such as the Italian Jewish writer Primo Levi, remained in Europe and wrote at the behest of their own dark muses.

# Critical Overview

The poetry of Paul Celan has generated intense critical interest for over fifty years. Writing in 1972, Jerry Glenn begins his book on Celan by stating, "Paul Celan is generally considered to be the most accomplished German-speaking lyric poet to emerge in recent decades." Even the most cursory examination of bibliographies in books about the poet reveals a rich secondary literature. Much of this literature is in German, but a substantial portion is in English, and some of it is in French. In her book *Pathways to Paul Celan: A History of Critical Responses as a Chorus of Discordant Voices*, Bianca Rosenthal declares that the beginning of Celan's critical reception was 1953, the year after *Poppy and Memory* was published. She states that he "stepped into the literary scene with this volume and immediately attracted attention." Several critics pointed out, either positively or negatively, the surrealistic aspects of Celan's work. Rosenthal quotes an anonymous reviewer in Stuttgart who said "Celan was able to name that which cannot be expressed and to transform it through complex imagery into comprehensible reality." She also quotes another German critic, Wieland Schmied, who compared Celan to Shakespeare and denied the poet was a surrealist, claiming that Celan's tightly controlled composition puts him far outside the surrealist camp.

As all major poets must do, Celan progressed stylistically and thematically as he matured. As Rosenthal said, "After the mid-1950s his poetry became more reticent and hermetic. The sounding voice changes into word artistry on the way to becoming the absolute poem." Celan's book *Sprachgitter* was, as Glenn says, "greeted by almost unanimous critical acclaim, and the book quickly solidified Celan's claim to a position as one of the leading German-speaking poets of the postwar era." Many critics have noted the turning in his poetry. Glenn explains: "The language continues to grow harder and colder, and the words sparser." The title itself, like much of the poet's work, is highly ambiguous, and is based on a medieval window containing a grill that allowed cloistered nuns to speak to the world.

Many critics have emphasized the care with which Celan chose his words. There is speculation about his allusions, about the influence of the German language and Hebrew. Amy Colin believes that "It is Celan's love for both his German mother tongue and for the language of the Jewish people that inspires his acrobatic language act over the abyss." It is striking how very detailed many of the critical works are, going down to the level of the significance of a single word, or even a single vowel. At the roots of his poetry is language in search of itself, a complex interplay between disparate linguistic and cultural traditions and, most profoundly, the response to the great tragedy of the Holocaust. Critical attention to Celan is still lively, and the 1997 publication of John Felstiner's *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* has contributed a full-length biography against which the many private allusions can be measured.

# Criticism


- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

# Critical Essay #1

*Pool is a published poet and reviewer and a teacher of high school English. In this essay, Pool deals with problems of interpretation in Celan's poem by discussing allusion and ironic reversal.*

Paul Celan's poem "Late and Deep" poses many problems for interpretation. His work is compact and allusive, and contains a multiplicity of possible meanings. A reader cannot always be certain of the meaning of terms and imagery, but given the respect accorded to the poet, perhaps it is best to say that one gets out of the poem what one can bring to it, based on knowledge of Celan's other work, and upon the typical themes, concerns, and motifs he uses. Celan often uses private symbols, and as his career progressed, his work became more and more spare and allusive. Some critics have accused him of hermeticism—of writing verse that is deliberately obscure and closed to interpretation by anyone but the poet himself. "Late and Deep," however, was included in his first widely-published collection, *Poppy and Memory*, and while it is difficult to understand in many places, Celan's meanings and intent may be discerned through a careful reading.

Celan frequently uses both Jewish and Christian imagery. He remains a Jew, and a Jew who writes in German, the language of his parents' murderers, when he could have also written in French, or Romanian, or Ukrainian, or Russian. He is deeply read in Jewish thought and literature, as well as in Martin Luther's German translation of the Christian Bible. Celan's concern with religion is quite apparent in his word choice, in his allusions, and in his subject matter. For all his urbane European sophistication, he remains at his core a Jew whose parents died in the Holocaust, and who can never escape the history of his people. Yet he is a nonbelieving Jew who, like fellow Romanian Jewish writer Elie Wiesel, has lost whatever religious faith he once may have held.

One of his most characteristic techniques is to work with religious allusions, which are often uplifting and hopeful, but which the poet undercuts, denies, or refutes. Jerry Glenn, in his book *Paul Celan* reports on the German critic Wienold's identification of this technique by the term *Widerruf*, which means, in effect, "poetic refutation." This refutation is a darkly ironic commentary on the hopes and promises offered by religion in its scriptures, prayers, and songs. For Celan, God's blessings are illusions, God is absent or nonexistent, and the futile cries for deliverance for his oppressed and slaughtered people are overwhelmingly, unbearably, poignant.

"Late and Deep" is a thorough example of the *Widerruf* technique, in that it seems to hold the promise of salvation through conversion from Judaism to Christianity, but in the end, not only the Second Coming, but also the First Coming of the Messiah is refuted and denied. Glenn quotes the German critic Weinold who has said that this poem "proclaims the impossibility of the Resurrection." Because the Resurrection is not possible, the hope it offers to Christians, or even to Christian converts, is no longer possible either. Therefore, it "accordingly reverses the Biblical quotation and suspends the effect of the Christian symbolism."

The poem is clearly about the Jews, the "ardent guests from the South," who swear an oath to "Christ the New." This conversion may be one more instance of forced conversion, which Jews have been subjected to over the centuries, or it may be in some sense free, but it is in every way unsatisfactory, because it blasphemes Jewish values, and perhaps, Christian ones as well. The poem begins with the image of "golden speech," which may allude to the oratory of Hitler or perhaps to the centuries of eloquent rhetoric employed by Christian bishops and preachers to persuade the Jews to abandon their faith and convert. The Jews are from the South, and are now in the land of the linden, which is a very typical European tree, much beloved by the Germans. "Autumn," several critics relate, is a word Celan associates with his mother, who was sent to a concentration camp during the Holocaust and was executed by being shot in the back of the head.

Images of sterility and futility abound. The speakers "swear to wed dust to dust." The last phrase is redolent of Christian burial prayers and images of death juxtaposed with wedding vows. The "birds to a wandering shoe" alludes to the medieval image of the Wandering Jew, outcast and moving eternally across the world. Glenn, in his book on Celan, quotes from the *Encylopaedia Judaica* that Ahasver, the "Wandering Jew, is not a single person, but is rather the entire Jewish people, which has been scattered throughout the world since the crucifixion of Christ and . . . will remain homeless until the end of the world." Clearly, there is no rest, there is no permanent home for the speakers of this poem. When the poet says that the speakers will swear to wed "our hearts to a stair in the water" the image is two-fold. First, in Celan's early poetry, water is a positive image. (It is thus darkly ironic that his death in 1970 was to be an apparent suicide by drowning in the Seine in Paris.) In this poem, however, regardless of its positive aspects, a stair in the water is unstable and shifting, fruitless, much like "sacred oaths of the sand," which in ironic reversal, parallel and mock Christ's saying, "upon this rock I will build my church."

There are biblical allusions in the poem. The rooftops may allude to the Jewish scripture of Isaiah 15:3, which warns of catastrophe. "In the streets they wear sackcloth; on the roofs and in the public squares they all wail, prostrate with weeping." Celan was quite familiar with Christian literature, and may be alluding to Luke 12:3. "What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs." These apparent allusions are succeeded by images of "dreamless sleep," which hint simultaneously at either peaceful sleep, or death, or even both at once.

The German language provides overtones of additional meaning. In such a line as "You grind in the mills of death the white meal of Promise," the word "meal" is unambiguously milled grain, such as corn meal. An observant reader who did not know German might be tempted to think of a meal such as the Last Supper, but the German does not have the same ambiguity as the English. The capitalized "Promise" in German is the word used in the phrase, "The Promised Land." This promise is nothing but the promise of death, the ground-up white bones of the slaughtered and crushed Jews whose promise comes to naught.

The whole poem seems to represent a religious person speaking an oath, but who is the speaker and who is being addressed? As we have seen, it is apparently a poem spoken by or on behalf of the Jews. The "you" that is being addressed, however, is a bit more problematic. Although it might seem to be God, who "grinds in the mills of death," and the one addressed in the line "You warn us: Blasphemy!" the German original dispels such a supposition. The word "ihr" in German is the second person plural familiar, which is something that English does not make unambiguously clear. The "you" could address the Germans or other Christians who want to convert the Jews, but it is not a reference to God.

A major image is the Jewish acceptance of the blasphemous attribution of guilt for the death of Christ, a blood-libel that has haunted the Jewish people throughout the weary centuries of Christian dominance. This alleged guilt is based on Matthew 27:25 in which Pontius Pilate tries to talk the Jewish crowds out of executing Christ, and they replied "His blood be on us, and on our children." Celan seems to suggest that even an acceptance of such guilt, blasphemous to any believing Jew, will not bring forth redemption. To accept that Jesus Christ was the Messiah or to proclaim belief in a Trinity is contrary to Jewish scripture. Yet, in the desperation of this poem, the speakers are willing to embrace such views, with a catch. The "gurgling sea" and the "armored windblast of conversion" allude both to Pharaoh pursuing the fleeing Hebrews across the Red Sea, and perhaps to the armored divisions of the German military. Celan asks that these things come once again, but he is deeply ironic and deeply pessimistic in this prayer.

In his final twist, Celan says, "let come what never yet was!" After all the signs and portents, in a world gone mad with killing, the invocation is to something that has not ever been□"a man come forth from the grave." With this touch, the poet denies the hope of a Second Coming by denying that there was ever a man, Jesus Christ, who came to earth, died, and then came forth from the grave. The poem, in all its bitterness, says that the Jews, even if they accept conversion, would find no refuge in a religion founded on a belief in something that "never yet was."

**Source:** Frank Pool, Critical Essay on "Late and Deep," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

# Critical Essay #2

*Carter is currently employed as a freelance writer. In this essay, Carter considers how both the events of the Holocaust and the struggle for identity inform Celan's work.*

In the poem "Late and Deep," Celan relies chiefly on historical and theological themes to reach his audience. The work, rife with both Christian and Jewish terms, images, and themes, provides a window into the internal struggles of the author. To classify Celan's effort as simply "Holocaust poetry" is to dismiss the complexities of the work itself. It is a poem informed not only by Celan's anguish and grief over the events of the Holocaust, but also through the struggle to embrace his own Jewishness in a hostile postwar climate.

The duality of Celan's poetic imagery sets up a theological tension within the work. Consider the Creation imagery within the very first few lines of the poem□the speaker declaring "we eat the apples of the mute." The apples could be seen as one of many pivotal symbols within the context of the entire work. An ancient Jewish allegory of Cant. 2:3, 5 and 8:5 (quoted in David Lyle Jeffrey's "A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature") identifies the "fair apple tree" as Israel, fairest among nations for its passion for the Law (Shab. 88, Tg. Ket. Cant. 2:3 in Jeffrey), or as the Lord, shading Israel from harm (Midr. Rab. Cant. 2:3 in Jeffrey). In direct contrast, Christian allegorists associate the apple (Cant. 2:5 in Jeffrey) with the fruits of Christ's sacrifice, particularly the Eucharist. Identification of the apple tree with the cross on which Christ was crucified was constant and inevitably associated with the tree of the original Garden of Eden. Christ is often identified as the second Adam, reversing the fall of mankind into sin as suffered by the first Adam.

Immediately in line 3, the reader is left with another image, Celan's star, but as to the meaning of what "thing" or intent the speaker assigns the symbol is another matter altogether. Of course, there is the immediate association with the Star of David or the Star of Bethlehem and the tension those elements together create. Taken in another context, the Star of David was worn by the Jews during the Holocaust as a means of identification. Thus, Celan comments with biting and almost painful sarcasm on the way the Star□a symbol of sacredness for both Christianity and Judaism□was used to single out, define, and ultimately mark the destruction of the European Jew.

As symbols shift and change from traditional meanings, so too the emotional tenor of the work is transformed from hope to despair. On the powerful use of religious imagery in Celan's poetry, John Felstiner's work, "The Strain of Jewishness," comments on poems that he claims "build their energy by oscillating between prayer and revolt: Blessed art thou, No One." Felstiner characterizes this as the "strain of Jewishness" in Paul Celan's work. According to Felstiner, Celan "knew well enough the burden of being Jewish, and avoided any religiosity, but a Jew he had to be and chose to be." It was a tenuous, attenuated strain, says Felstiner, "yet a tough one: sometimes it was all [Celan] felt he had." Celan lived under the specter of the Holocaust, haunted by the loss of his

parents and his own eighteen-month internment at a Nazi labor camp, and it is this personal history that informs the author's work.

According to Raul Hilberg's "The Destruction of the European Jew," the picture of the Jew the Nazis relied so heavily upon to fuel propaganda is part of a tradition of hatred that originated in Germany several hundred years ago. Martin Luther had already created the framework on which a disparaging stereotype of Jewish people was built, namely that Jewish people are bent on world domination, referring to them maliciously as the "killers of Christ and all of Christendom" and as "a plague, pestilence and pure misfortune." In a speech delivered in 1935 to the Hitler Youth, Gauleiter Julius Streicher mirrored this sentiment□spinning hatred in the context of religion□by reducing the Jewish people to little more than "that organized body of world criminals, against whom already Christ had fought, the greatest Anti-Semite of all times" (quoted in Hilberg). Celan was a direct target of this intense hatred, one that did not immediately evaporate at the end of the war. It would be the late 1950s before Germany began to prosecute war criminals. Of 1950s Germany, Felstiner says "there was numbness, repression, denial, apathy, or expedient forgetfulness of the European Jewish catastrophe." To reenter Europe in the 1950s as a German and contemplate what would later be labeled the Holocaust was very difficult for many Germans and involved either coming to terms with military defeat and mass murder in Germany or a regression into denial and resentment.

The movement within "Late and Deep" indicates Celan's misgivings about hope, faith, and salvation after enduring in such a hostile environment. In light of his personal history, such movement illuminates the author's psychic struggle with the Holocaust and his attempts to reconcile his Jewishness. At the outset of the poem, the speaker swears allegiance "by Christ the New to wed dust to dust," with unusual zeal, raising the question of the speaker's conversion. But the tone immediately shifts to a rather strong objection or cry of "blasphemy." At this point comes an acknowledgement of the reality of the speaker's fate, as dictated by the "mills of death," rather than God's "Promise" of redemption for his chosen people. Celan calls on the gruesome images of the Holocaust to amplify a feeling of abandonment and alienation. In the midst of his personal dilemma and abandoned by God, the speaker abandons all hope, all faith, defying all prospects of a miraculous salvation with the challenge, "Let come what never yet was!"

In an attempt to reinvent his own existence, the speaker first embraces a dogma completely contrary to his own beliefs, without effect. His declaration or oath to "Christ the New" is indicative of a movement toward repentance and humility before God, often followed by an acknowledgement of the Resurrection in the Christian tradition. It appears the speaker is cornered by despair and his words, at first, might be construed as a plea for forgiveness. However, Abraham in Genesis 18:27 uses dust as a metonym or figure of speech for human mortality. The irony of the situation is that the author cannot escape his anguish, whether he chooses to take an oath to devote or "wed" himself to the blasphemous promises of Christ or embrace his own heritage of ashes. The speaker cannot reinvent nor save himself.

Remorse, not repentance, does indeed come midway through the poem for the speaker. A charge of "Blasphemy!" brings with it a sense of resignation. "We've known it long since," repeats the speaker, "but who cares?" The history informing Celan's work explains the underlying tension in his poetic voice, brought to life in the passionately charged words of the speaker who, faced with the horrible reality of the Holocaust, reaches out in vain to find some answers. The atrocities of the Holocaust seem irreconcilable. During this incredibly dark time in history, no one in Germany seemed to be listening. Thousands of Jews were led to their death without protest, as thousands of Germans turned a blind eye to the fate of their neighbors. That denial of something so terribly real could run so deep in a culture is captured in the poem's frenzied tone. Intense, rife with emotion, the work is erratic and even at many points absurd. The speaker's sense of hope and solidarity has been shattered by a paradoxical guilt for simply being Jewish, for being the object of such inhumane malice, and for blaspheming his people's beliefs in the struggle for hope and survival. Feelings of alienation and of abandonment are echoed in verse.

Theologically conflicting religious symbols used throughout Paul Celan's "Late and Deep," shifting in meaning, transmuting in form, suggest that for Celan, peace of mind is elusive at best. The speaker's increasing agitation crescendos into his last words of desperate challenge, daring or beseeching God to materialize in some form, any form, to make sense of it all. The irony of the speaker's bitter soliloquy is that no one seems to be listening.

**Source:** Laura Carter, Critical Essay on "Late and Deep," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

# Topics for Further Study

Do research on some of the main writers on the Holocaust, paying special attention to Paul Celan, Primo Levi, and Elie Wiesel. What sorts of writing did they produce, and what are the parallels in their biographies?

Locate and listen to a recording of Henryk Gorecki's *Third Symphony*, which is a lament for the atrocities committed against the Polish people by the Nazis. What emotional effects are conveyed by his music, and how do they compare to the emotions expressed by Paul Celan?

Locate and watch two or more videos or DVDs dealing with the Holocaust, such as *Schindler's List*, *Shoah*, or *Anne Frank, The Whole Story*. How do different directors approach the topic in different ways?

The crimes of the Holocaust can be compared to several other genocides. Do research into the genocide against the Armenians during World War I, against the Rwandans in the 1990s, and compare them both to the crimes of the African diaspora and to the depopulation of many parts of the Americas. Make a chart listing significant similarities and the most important differences between these events.

# Compare and Contrast

**1940s—1950s:** Paul Celan's parents are deported from Czernowitz, Romania, to a concentration camp, where they die.

**Today:** Only a few regimes in the world, such as North Korea, incarcerate large numbers of people in concentration camps.

**1940s—1950s:** Existentialism and surrealism are important political and artistic movements in Paris, influencing artists, writers, and thinkers throughout the world.

**Today:** Postmodernism dominates critically acclaimed culture and thought.

**1940s—1950s:** The free world is locked in a struggle against Nazi fascism, followed by a confrontation with Soviet communism.

**Today:** With the collapse of communism, the free world confronts the challenge of international terrorism.

**1940s—1950s:** Poets and writers use books and magazines to disseminate their stories, essays, and novels to a text-centered audience.

**Today:** In addition to books and magazines, poets, writers, and musicians use Internet weblogs, websites, and file-swapping to get their ideas and writings out to multiple audiences.

# What Do I Read Next?

*Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* (2001), translated by John Felstiner, includes "Late and Deep" as well as other representative poems by Celan. Both German and English texts of the poem are presented.

*Night* (1960), by Elie Wiesel, is a very personal account of the Holocaust by a man who was approximately the same age as Celan and came from the same part of Europe.

*The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry* (1990), by Leni Yahil, is a dense volume that might be better sampled than read cover to cover. Nevertheless, it is a valuable detailed account of the *Shoah*.

John Felstiner's *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (1997) is the first full-length biography of the poet in English. It includes details of Celan's personal life as well as the sources and methods of his poetry.

Jerry Glenn's *Paul Celan* (1972) is a good introduction to the criticism of specific Celan poems. The text is well written and accessible.

# Further Study

Chalfen, Israel, *Paul Celan: A Biography of His Youth*, Persea Books, 1991.

This short book traces Celan's life up to the point where he moves to Vienna in 1947 and contains a number of poems that can be linked with specific instances in his life.

Hoffman, Eva, *After Such Knowledge: Where Memory of the Holocaust Ends and History Begins*, Public Affairs, 2004.

As the survivors of the Holocaust die of old age sixty years after the event, how does the memory of this event affect subsequent generations? This book of essays deals with the personal reactions of the second generation, the children of the survivors, and takes up issues of personal and collective responsibility.

Levi, Primo, *Survival in Auschwitz*, Touchstone Books, 1995.

This book is an account of Levi's ten months in the infamous death camp. It is remarkable for its restraint and close observation of life and death.

Wiesel, Elie, *The Night Trilogy: Night, Dawn, The Accident*, Noonday Press, 1987.

These three short novels deal with young men surviving the Holocaust, victims becoming executioners, and trying to make a new life with the memories.

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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 unnamedfor 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.

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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.

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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