Lepidopterology Study Guide

Lepidopterology by Jesper Svenbro

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Jesper Svenbro has been one of the leading poets in his native Sweden since he published his second collection of poetry in 1979. His poems are evocative and engaging, rich with allusions ranging from classical mythology to the landscape of Scandinavia to poets such as the ancient Greek Sappho and the modernist T. S. Eliot. An accomplished classical scholar who lives and works in Paris, Svenbro addresses philosophical, psychological, linguistic, and political themes in such a way that they are accessible to the average student but are also provocative for the most learned readers.

Svenbro made his debut in the English language with poems such as □Lepidopterology,□ which was originally published in the fall 1999 issue of *Chicago Review* and is also included in *Three-toed Gull* (2003), Svenbro's first poetry collection translated into English. With its extended comparison of the human psyche to the various stages of the butterfly's life cycle, □Lepidopterology□ is a vivid poem that profoundly explores psychology, language, and science. Dramatizing what Svenbro in the poem calls □the seemingly insoluble conflict between dream and reality,□ □Lepidopterology□ depicts the caterpillar's process of ceasing to eat and beginning to spin its cocoon□which Svenbro characterizes as an act of □total resignation□□as well as the butterfly's emergence from its pupa. These rich metaphors compare the butterfly's flight to the miracle of human psychology as well as the ability of a poem to burst outside the confines of language.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Swedish

Birthdate: 1944

Jesper Svenbro was born on March 10, 1944, in Landskrona, a small town in southern Sweden. His father, a highly respected clergyman, died when Svenbro was a child, and memories of this experience appear in the poet's later work. Svenbro began reading the classics when he was young, and he also enjoyed hiking in Lapland when he was a teenager. He studied for a short time at Yale University and then at the École pratique in Paris. He later earned his doctorate in classics from Lund University, the largest university in Scandinavia. In 1977, he moved to Paris to work for the Centre national de la recherche scientifique, a prominent French public research organization.

After publishing his first volume of poetry in 1966, at age twenty-two, Svenbro concentrated largely on his career as a classical scholar, waiting thirteen years before publishing another collection of poems in 1979. He has since published another seven volumes of poetry, and his poems have been translated into many languages. □Lepidopterology□ was translated into English and published in the *Chicago Review* in 1999. It later appeared in the first book-length English-language publication of his poetry, *Three-toed Gull*, published in 2003. Allusions in Svenbro's poetry have ranged from the poets Sappho and T. S. Eliot to artistic and cultural figures that include the French mime Marcel Marceau and elements of Svenbro's personal life, such as a notebook his father kept during World War II.

Svenbro is a successful poet in Sweden, where he has won many awards. In addition to his poetry, he has published two collections of essays in Swedish. He has also translated Greek, Italian, and French poetry into Swedish and has published numerous articles. An internationally renowned classicist, Svenbro has published three scholarly works about ancient Greek literature and culture.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

□Lepidopterology□ begins by stating that the butterfly was an important creature □in psychology,□ which seems to mean the science of psychology but also suggests the human mind in general. The word *lepidopterology* simply means the study of lepidoptera, which is the order of insects comprising butterflies and moths. The idea that the butterfly has played an important role in the development of human psychology, and the implication that its process of transformation is a metaphor for the mind, will continue to be important throughout the poem. Since the first line begins □For a long time□ and is in the past tense, however, Svenbro implies either that the butterfly no longer holds its prominent place in psychology or that its prominence has nothing to do with its caterpillar and pupa stages.

Line 2 suggests that it was because of the butterfly's caterpillar phase and its □difficult sloughing□ (which refers to the process of shedding the protective covering of the pupa) that it held a prominent place in human psychology. In lines 3 and 4, however, the speaker places particular emphasis on the pupa stage as the reason that the butterfly used to be important to psychology. During this stage, the caterpillar surrounds itself for one to two weeks in a protective covering that hangs from a branch and allows the pupa to undergo an internal metamorphosis, during which it develops its adult organs. The speaker describes this phase as involving a □total paralysis of the will,□ which is an example of the literary device of personification, because it attributes human characteristics to an insect.

Lines 5-16

Lines 5 and 6 describe people's fascination with the pupa stage, because of the □frustrated□ and □high-soaring□ dreams of the caterpillar. Again, the speaker is associating caterpillars with the human experience of dreaming and is engaging in personification. Also, since it is impossible to have studied a caterpillar's dreams, there is the suggestion that caterpillars are being used as metaphors for humans or the human mind. In any case, the people who are studying the caterpillar's dreams notice how they are at odds with its □ungainly,□ or awkward and unwieldy, body.

Beginning with the last word of line 7 and running through the middle of line 11, the speaker describes the caterpillar dreaming of something greater than its reality; eating no more food; making its □shroud□ (which refers to the garment wrapped around a dead human body); and preparing to die. This description implicitly compares the human □conflict between dream and reality□ with a caterpillar's process of ceasing to eat and its creation of a membranous shell to protect it during the pupa stage, as though the caterpillar has given up on life because it was unable to realize any of its dreams.

The middle of line 11 signals a shift in the poem, since it is the end of the first sentence and it opens with the word □But.□ Skipping to the end of the pupa stage, lines 11-14 describe the □dried-out condition□ of the former caterpillar as similar to taxonomy, the process of scientific classification of a species and its mounting in a museum showcase. The speaker then says that something □unexpected□ and □totally unforeseen□ occurred, which allows people □to believe in the impossible□ and, presumably, in dreams. It is interesting to note, however, that the reader both expects and foresees the transformation of the caterpillar into a butterfly, which suggests that there is something else that will unexpectedly give people the right to believe in dreams.

Lines 17-23

The turning point of □Lepidopterology□ comes in line 17, with the introduction of Georg Stiernhielm (1598-1672), a late-Renaissance writer and scholar known as the father of Swedish poetry. Writing that Stiernhielm's poem □The Silk-Worm□ established him as the founder of Swedish lepidopterology, the speaker suggests that this poem is the unexpected and dramatic event described in lines 15 and 16. Then, in lines 19 and 20, the speaker says that psychology □took a great step forward□ in Stiernhielm's poem, by turning into a butterfly and establishing itself as a science. It is important to note that the speaker begins line 19 with the word □But,□ as though to suggest that the taxonomical science of studying butterflies is somehow opposed to the □full-fledged science□ of psychology.

In line 21, the speaker states that □you,□ which may refer to Stiernhielm, told the speaker that □*psykhe*□□Swedish for the □mind□ or the □psyche□□□really means 'butterfly.'□ This is a curious way of phrasing the idea that the human mind is like the life cycle of a butterfly, and it seems to come from Stiernhielm's poem. The speaker then goes on to say that □you□ said the butterfly (and the human psyche) crept out of its cocoon, or prehistory, and began to fly fearlessly in the wind. Svenbro's use of the word □prehistory□ to describe the cocoon reinforces the idea that the butterfly's life cycle represents not just an individual human mind but also the evolution of the human mind in general.

Lines 24-28

Continuing the conceit, or extended comparison, that a poem is like the human psyche/butterfly life cycle, the speaker states that the poem, like the cocoon, is the burial shroud from line 10. Discarded in a miserable heap on the ground, this cocoon is □only a measure□ of the triumph of dreams □announced□ and represented by the butterfly's flight. The butterfly has flown out of the language of this poem to be □ablaze in the sun,□ and its flight displays and verifies its □brilliant and dizzying love.□

These final four lines are important for a number of reasons, perhaps primarily because they achieve the very effect that they describe: the butterfly seems to fly out of the poem □Lepidopterology□ to affirm something greater than the language used to describe it.

The choice of words in these lines is also interesting; the word □victory□ in line 26 stands out, for example, and may suggest that the butterfly and the poem are victorious over the frustrating realities that plagued the caterpillar early in the poem. The last phrase, □brilliant and dizzying love,□ is also an important turn, and it is likely that Svenbro is associating the triumphant and victorious dreams represented by the successful poem and the flying butterfly with the phenomenon of human love.

Themes

Psychology

One of Svenbro's most important themes in □Lepidopterology□ is psychology, beginning with the speaker's comparison of the butterfly's earthbound stages of development to the psyche and continuing through the last lines about the psyche/butterfly escaping the confines of language. Svenbro uses the butterfly in its various stages of development as a metaphor for the human condition, treating the pupa stage, for example, as an illustration of the universal psychological desire to live and dream beyond the confines of □earthbound□ existence. Similarly, the butterfly's emergence from its cocoon is compared to the human capacity to forge ideas, achievements, and self-consciousness emerging from mundane reality.

Svenbro's examination of psychology is not just a commentary on the human mind itself but also a view of the scientific discipline of psychology. In fact, sometimes it is difficult to distinguish whether the poet is discussing the historical development of the human mind or the history of the scientific study of the mind. Svenbro's use of lepidopterology, which means the scientific study of moths and butterflies, along with his references to taxonomy (the science of categorization and classification) imply that human psychology can be rather like the classification of animals. When he discusses the emergence of psychology as a □full-fledged science,□ however, the poet distinguishes the endeavor from taxonomical science, which involves placing dead butterflies and pupae in museum showcases.

One interpretation of this commentary on psychology is that Svenbro is praising the developments in human arts and sciences, such as the Renaissance poet Georg Stiernhielm's innovations in poetry, which fostered humankind's ability to think of psychology outside its constraints of reality and □frustrated dreams.□ The poet envisions this triumph in terms of a □victory□ over the strictly rationalistic science represented by the □windless museum.□ Svenbro may be suggesting that the European Renaissance of the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries opened up possibilities far beyond methodical scientific process and allowed people □to believe in the impossible,□ or to recognize meanings above and beyond the quantifiable.

Literary Aesthetics and Science

Beginning with the reference in line 17 to Georg Stiernhielm, Svenbro expands his commentary to the subjects of literature and philosophy of art, or aesthetics. The poem associates Stiernhielm's poem □The Silk-Worm,□ and poetry in general, with psychology, implying that innovations in literature allow a glimpse of the true and wondrous nature of the mind. Svenbro establishes this idea by dramatizing a butterfly's emergence from its cocoon alongside his description of the □great step forward□ of

Stiernhielm's poem, as if the butterfly were coming to life out of the words of □The Silk-Worm.□

By separating the poem's first half, with its references to taxonomy, from the references to poetry in the second half, Svenbro suggests that the power of great literature is greater than that of scientific classification. While taxonomic classification results in a butterfly pupa's being placed inside a showcase, poetry allows the □*psykhe*□ the □victory□ of its full expression. The poem implies, therefore, that science has its limitations and, in fact, becomes □full-fledged□ only when it is given the linguistic power to transcend literal language. This is why the butterfly flies □out of language□ and the literal words are a dead burial □shroud□ that merely points the way toward the true meaning of an object or living thing.

Dreams and Reality

In line 8, Svenbro refers to □the seemingly insoluble conflict between dream and reality,□ and he expands on this idea throughout the poem. He goes on to suggest, for example, that there is a connection between dreams and reality that can be affirmed by the □great step forward□ of poetry's insight into the human psyche. The poem seems to imply that it is necessary and important to achieve a connection to dreams and that it is the function of psychology and poetry to bring people closer to what is characterized by □brilliant and dizzying love,□ unconfined by language. Svenbro's allusion to Stiernhielm's poem □The Silk-Worm□ reinforces this idea, because the silkworm was a common motif in Stiernhielm's time, representing love's restorative power.

Style

Personification

Throughout □Lepidopterology,□ Svenbro describes the butterfly and its transformation process as if it were a human. □Frustrated dreams,□ □paralysis of the will,□ and □brilliant and dizzying love□ are aspects of human, not animal, psychology, and their inclusion in the speaker's description of butterflies requires readers to suspend disbelief and imagine that butterflies think and feel as humans do. This method of envisioning a butterfly as a creature with a human mind is an example of the literary device of personification, in which human characteristics are associated with an animal, idea, or object. Personification is a key tool in Svenbro's poem, because it allows him to make insights about human psychology in a much more vivid manner than would be possible with a literal description of the □conflict between dream and reality□ in a person's mind.

Conceit

The technique of personification, described earlier, makes it possible for Svenbro to establish his poem's central □conceit,□ or elaborate and extended metaphor. (A metaphor is a comparison in which one object or idea is substituted for another.) The conceit of □Lepidopterology□ is that the butterfly serves as a metaphor for the human mind. Thus, instead of ceasing to eat and spinning a shroud around its body because it is ready to transform into a butterfly, the caterpillar does these things because it is totally resigned to the □insoluble conflict between dream and reality.□ Svenbro extends the logic of this conceit to compare the similarities between the ways in which psychology views and treats the human mind and the caterpillar's □dried-out□ pupa. The conceit continues throughout the poem until the butterfly in flight serves as a metaphor for the □brilliant and dizzying love□ of the human mind. It is through this conceit that Svenbro is able to comment on his primary themes□the nature of the mind and the development of psychology.

Historical Context

Contemporary Sweden

Known for its model of public-private partnership, Sweden has one of the most advanced welfare systems and highest standards of living in the world. The taxation rate is very high in exchange for excellent social services, including universal health care and education. Although the Swedish economy experienced some setbacks during the 1990s, it is growing quickly, and the rate of unemployment is low.

Swedish politics were dominated in the late 1990s by the country's relationship to the European Union. One of three European Union countries to reject a common currency, Sweden continues its history of retaining a degree of independence from European and international politics. Sweden maintains its long-standing foreign policy of neutrality and declines to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Contemporary France

France is a country at the heart of European culture and politics but with a vivid and unique cultural tradition of its own. During the early 1990s, the socialist government was involved in a series of scandals, and the center-right government led by Jacques Chirac was elected in 1995. Chirac met with considerable resistance as he attempted to privatize many public companies and reduce spending on social services, and he lost his firm control over the government in the 1997 elections. In 1999, the common European currency was successfully launched, and the French continued to favor the integration of European states.

Since World War II, France has been home to many of the most important and influential intellectual figures in the world. Postmodern and cultural theorists, including Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault, lived and worked in Paris, contributing to the city's unparalleled intellectual atmosphere. The French literary scene was also vibrant throughout the 1990s, a decade during which French literary efforts included a broad range of experimentalism.

Swedish Poetry after World War II

From the end of World War II until the mid-1960s, Swedish poetry was associated with high modernism and □formalism,□ or poetry that emphasizes structure and style over content. In the 1960s, however, a younger generation of poets began to emerge, with a tendency to focus on politics using a direct and engaging style. These writers (of Svenbro's generation) were inclined to disdain the distanced and measured tone that they associated with their predecessors, and their work was characterized by energetic and visceral, or nonintellectual and even earthy, language. The divide between the

generations grew less urgent as the years passed, but the legacy of the poets of Svenbro's generation has continued.

Georg Stiernhielm and the Renaissance

Georg Stiernhielm, to whom Svenbro makes a key allusion in □Lepidopterology,□ was a poet, scholar, scientist, and civil servant who is known as the father of Swedish poetry. Stiernhielm's □Silkesmasken□ (□The Silk-Worm□) is considered the first sonnet in the Swedish language, the silkworm being, as John Matthias and Lars-Håkan Svensson write in their translator's notes to *Three-toed Gull*, a motif of the era that symbolized □spiritual regeneration or love's restorative power.□ As a prominent figure of the Northern European Renaissance, a period known for producing great innovations in the arts and sciences, Stiernhielm was influenced by the humanistic tradition that revived the classics of ancient Greece and Rome, cultivated an individualistic spirit, and departed from strictly religious subject matter. Stiernhielm's most famous work is the epic and philosophical poem *Hercules* (1658), in which the classical story of the demigod Hercules is applied to Swedish culture.

Critical Overview

In Sweden, Svenbro is considered one of the most prominent and popular poets of his generation, which included a group of writers who emerged in the 1960s and sought to move away from the formalism of their predecessors. Although Svenbro's first poetry collection was not widely successful, his second collection, published in 1979, earned him a reputation as an original and compelling poet, and he has since received numerous awards in Sweden for his poetry. Svenbro's work has also been translated into French, German, and Italian, and he has established himself as a leading scholar and poet on the European continent. However, Svenbro's first collection in English, *Three-toed Gull*, has received little critical attention since it was published by Northwestern University Press in 2003.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is an independent scholar with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell discusses Svenbro's commentary on literary aesthetics throughout the first two sections of Three-toed Gull *in order to analyze the poet's treatment of poetry and linguistics in Lepidopterology.*

□Lepidopterology□ is one of the more accessible poems of Svenbro's collection, with its clear narrative progression and its single extended metaphor in which a butterfly, in its various stages of development, is compared to the human psyche. Like many of the other poems in *Three-toed Gull*, however, it is also a subtle and challenging meditation on language and aesthetics, a branch of philosophy that studies the nature of beauty. Its dramatization of the □seemingly insoluble conflict between dream and reality□ that locks itself into a closed cocoon is a reference to poetry, another type of cocoon that holds language in one place. The central question of □Lepidopterology□ is how meaning and significance break out of this cocoon, bridging the gap between words and reality and creating a successful poem.

Svenbro is a classical scholar with an interest in the origins of language, and throughout his work, he is invested in the process of self-consciously approaching, interpreting, and interacting with words. The first two sections of *Three-toed Gull* focus overtly on the history and psychology of language, the various approaches to taking ownership of language and meaning, the connection between language and representation, and Svenbro's own relationship to the language of his poetry. In fact, because its themes are developed throughout the poems that surround it, the full resonance of □Lepidopterology□ is unavailable to readers until they place it in the context of Svenbro's wider exploration of linguistics, or the study of speech and language. The goal of this essay, therefore, is to highlight the poet's theory of literary aesthetics and to apply this theory to □Lepidopterology.□

The aesthetic vision of *Three-toed Gull* begins with the first poem, □A Critique of Pure Representation.□ Here, Svenbro establishes the idea that language is □not god, / not a position from which the world 'down there' can be gauged□ but a physical and self-referential phenomenon. This is a somewhat difficult concept, since it is not necessarily clear, at first, what exactly Svenbro means when he describes language □attain[ing] weight□ and □constitut[ing],□ as opposed to describing, the real world. Unless readers are well acquainted with postmodern linguistic theory, they might be left wondering how and why a word could be a physical object, like a stone.

In the poem that follows □A Critique of Pure Representation,□ however, Svenbro provides a more specific explanation of what it means to consider language as a series of worldly objects as opposed to an abstract system of classification. The metaphor for the history of the Swedish language that is presented in □Material for a Geological Theory of Language□ provides a groundwork for considering words both less and more than an objective format for describing reality. Although it is presented as a subtext□the underlying, implied meaning□surrounded by parentheses, the observation in lines 21-

23 is extremely useful in understanding Svenbro's linguistic theory: □Language is disintegration, / but concurrent with disintegration there is construction / whereby crumbling material is given another meaning.□ Here, the idea that language is disintegration□that describing something in words makes it fall apart and lose its meaning□comments on the idea that language is capable of objective representation. Svenbro is suggesting that the traditional view of language, as an inflexible system of abstract concepts used to describe reality, is inadequate for pinning down the meaning of something as variable as the real world. In fact, humanity's attempts to describe reality have resulted in a □crumbling□ of meaning; abstract words cannot correspond to their previous or original meanings because the world, language, and interpretations are constantly changing. Svenbro suggests, therefore, that it is better to view words as physical objects that have a time, a place, and an age. This limits the ability of words to describe reality of all times and cultures, but it also increases their power to represent specific and actual meanings.

□The Phonetics of Resistance□ is a playful and perhaps ironic poem that addresses the idea of words as variable objects in another context. Describing an inflexible skeleton of language as a □reproducible paradigm□ that people repeat forever, Svenbro suggests (probably ironically, since a skeleton is a dead body) that language can be both permanent and physical after all. Similarly, □Homage to T. S. Eliot□ suggests that there used to be a permanent and objective □gold standard□ in values as well as language, but Svenbro becomes ironic when he suggests a return to this system. Calling it □the despotism of fictive values,□ the speaker suggests that a fixed standard of abstract language would result in a tyranny by which the meanings of words would not actually correspond to the real world.

It is important to note, however, that Svenbro's commentary about the variability of language does not tend to suggest that words and their meanings are completely displaced from their tradition. An accomplished classicist, Svenbro is always aware of how language relates to its sources. In □Hermes *Boukólos*,□ for example, Svenbro uses the topic of bucolic poetry, or pastoral poetry about rural themes, and the metaphor of cows (to stand for words or lines of a poem) to suggest that the significance of a poem is related to its linguistic tradition somewhat like a herd of cattle is related to its ancestors.

Svenbro expands on this intriguing metaphor of cattle for poetry, taking into account the phenomenon of interpretation. Claiming that □all poetry is bucolic and the interpreter a cattle thief / who before restoring the cows he has stolen / makes them calve in secret and keeps the calves for himself,□ the speaker implies that a reading of a poem produces a greater distance between the poetry and its significance. Nevertheless, readers have their own physical, real icons of interpretation. Furthermore, Svenbro highlights the idea that the process of interpretation occurs at night and that readers must trace the hoof marks of the cows in order to □close on [the] heels□ of possessing their interpretations. Then, in a final twist, Svenbro suggests that these hoof marks are the same as those of traditional generations and that therefore the readers' lengthy process of interpretation can be traced back, albeit imperfectly, to the linguistic tradition behind the poems.

Numerous additional poems develop, explore, or test Svenbro's linguistic theory, whereby words are treated as physical objects instead of inflexible abstract codes. Like □Hermes *Boukólos*,□ they often involve a somewhat ambiguous and playful treatment of language, significance, and tradition. In □Classic Experiment,□ for example, the speaker imagines himself within a simile from Homer's *Iliad*, in a world/interpretation that seems to have broken free from the original significance of the epic poem. □Mont Blanc□ then brings up the possibility of □a new language without syntax / . . . ris[ing] out of the dusky blue of existence,□ while □The Lake School Manifesto□ presents a vision and interpretation of the *Iliad* that is incorporated into a local Swedish tradition and natural climate.

Svenbro presents a multifaceted and subtle theory of literary aesthetics, therefore, in which language and poetry are physical, malleable phenomena. Throughout Svenbro's metaphors and visions of linguistics, there is a refusal to accept the commonly held notion that words are abstract concepts used to describe the real world. Instead, to Svenbro, words are physically immediate objects, and interpretations of words are fleeting processes that involve an interaction with these objects. Poetry, meanwhile, is a process of suggesting and indicating the tracks to take toward the meaning and significance of these words and interpretations.

□Lepidopterology□ is a particularly interesting poem in this context because it can be read as a metaphor for the poetic process. Comparing the science of lepidopterology to the act of writing a poem, Svenbro emphasizes that the classification process is not enough to capture permanent and fixed meaning for all time. Taxonomy, which involves categorizing and classifying the pupa of the butterfly, is successful only in preserving the caterpillar's period of □total paralysis of the will,□ resulting in a lifeless exhibit in a □showcase in some windless museum.□ As Svenbro emphasizes in □A Critique of Pure Representation□ and throughout the first two sections of *Three-toed Gull*, language is □not a position from which the world 'down there' can be gauged.□ If the butterfly across all of its stages of life is a metaphor for the human psyche, language that attempts to classify the world from the taxonomical standpoint of pure representation can capture nothing more than the dry, lifeless pupa stage.

Indeed, in order to find the language to depict the □high-soaring dreams□ of the human psyche, represented by a fully developed butterfly, the poet must take Georg Stiernhielm's □great step forward.□ Since language is incapable of containing or classifying the full significance of the human psyche inside a poem, it must simply attempt to indicate the various paths toward which the reader can access the fuller resonance of the subject. A poem, to Svenbro, □is only the shroud left on the ground,□ like the caterpillar's cocoon, left behind in a □miserable crumpled heap□ when the high-soaring dreams of the psyche fly □out of language.□ Physical and alterable, words are objects open to interpretation, and the poetic process is a method of organizing them as an inspiration and a guideline toward the true meaning of the work. Recognizing the limitations of language and the power of interpretation allows a poet to inspire readers to achieve the □victory announced by the butterfly's wings.□

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on □Lepidopterology,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at two colleges in Illinois. In this essay, he considers whether Svenbro's use of dry, clinical language in his poem is justified.

Readers familiar with Svenbro's poetry are accustomed to finding in his work an open terrain, where art meets science on equal footing. Readers who are not accustomed to his work are sometimes surprised at the degree to which he tends to slip out of his poetic voice, adapting a scientific tone. In his poem □Lepidopterology,□ for instance, Svenbro examines the struggle of the caterpillar to grow into a butterfly, a natural progression that to this day provides poets with metaphors for aspiration, isolation, growth, and self-awareness. Many poets would find themselves content with simply focusing on one of nature's most poignant and fascinating events, but Svenbro goes beyond the butterfly's story to the story of the scientists who examine it and the poet Georg Stiernhielm, who gave science a new way of looking at it, which, Svenbro claims, opened the door for psychology several centuries before Sigmund Freud. If □Lepidopterology□ were just a poem about a poem, it would stay in the familiar area of poetic language. It is a poem about scientific breakthrough, though, and so Svenbro uses a type of language, basically scientific in tone, that is unusual in poetry. With no clues in the poem's style to show his awareness of shifting tones, readers are left wondering if the inconsistency is a conscious poetic device or a sign of lack of control.

People are often thought to have different, exclusive abilities when it comes to different intellectual functions. Most people are categorized as predominantly □artistic□ or □logical,□ □verbal□ or □numeric.□ Schools divide areas of study into the broad categories of □sciences□ and □humanities,□ as if the two types of thought are meant to compete with each other. There are, of course, people who overcome the common expectations by showing themselves able to cross the barrier: lawyers who publish novels, for instance, or dedicated musicians who are able to work at accounting jobs in order to support themselves when their true gift fails to pay the bills. Generally, though, the skills of even the most well-rounded individuals are not considered to be equally proportioned, so that they end up being considered good in science but great in art or greatly creative but superbly logical. Western thought might be able to accept the two modes of thought as equal, but it will always be dedicated to keeping them separate.

Modes of writing are similarly separated, falling on various places in a spectrum that divides at the halfway point into □creative writing□ and □technical writing.□ Poetry hovers at one extreme, standing for creativity and implied rather than overt expression. Readers accept mystery from poetry, which frees it from the requirements of clarity that constrain expository writing: trying to understand all of a poem's mysteries is sometimes viewed as a hostile act, as if the inquisitor is looking to □analyze it to death.□ Poems are permitted □poetic license,□ which in general parlance means that they can use words that are not technically correct but that nonetheless capture the correct meaning on a different level. Writing that is intended primarily to instruct and to convey information is considered poetry's diametric opposite.

By these standards, Svenbro's poem □Lepidopterology□ suffers from a personality disorder. Like a poem, it approaches its readers from the intuitive side of their brains, discussing abstract issues with words that hint at Svenbro's meaning without spelling it out. In other places, though, the poem presents information dryly, directly, using the tone of a textbook or lecture hall. Assuming that Svenbro was aware of the inconsistency, there are several ways to look at □Lepidopterology.□ It could be called an homage to Georg Stiernhielm, whose groundbreaking achievement in his poem □The Silk-Worm□ Svenbro celebrates. It could be considered a case of form serving function, as Svenbro adapts a pedantic tone to drive home to readers the fact that his subject is an admittedly boring one, taking them through the back corridors of academic history. Or it could be seen as a hybrid, mixing poetic sensibilities with distinctly theoretical views while allowing neither to dominate.

Readers have no problem recognizing □Lepidopterology□ as a poem. It has the shape of a poem. Though not relying on such formal elements as line breaks, stress patterns, or repetition in sounds, Svenbro's conscious decisions about where each line should end still tell readers that a poetic sensibility is in control of this work. Furthermore, the poem uses phrases throughout that engage the reader's imagination, as effective poetry ought to, by implying situations that are more complex than the words on the page overtly claim. Phrases like □its difficult sloughing,□ □the frustrated dreams of the caterpillar,□ □insoluble conflict between dream and reality,□ and □the right to believe in the impossible□ all serve to raise the objective facts of the caterpillar's worldly situation above the obvious. Surface reality is taken to a new, less obvious level of awareness. This is the business of poetry.

For about half its length, the poem proceeds effectively as a poetic meditation on the broader consequences of this one insect's progression, from caterpillar to pupa to butterfly. Just past the halfway point, though, the time changes: instead of evoking the mysteries of the universe, Svenbro starts to talk like a professor, professing his ideas directly and clearly.

This new, businesslike approach starts in the seventeenth line, with the mention of Georg Stiernhielm. It is rare, but in no way strange, for a poem to pay homage to a respected writer within its lines, but Svenbro handles this homage in a way that is conspicuously formal and stiff. Using first and last name together, he suggests that his reader is not expected to be familiar with Stiernhielm's work, introducing him as his name might be found in a reference work. The poem abandons the verbal flexibility that is usually the mark of artistic freedom and instead turns stiff in its language. The way Svenbro carefully announces Stiernhielm's name and his most important work suggests that they might pop up on a quiz when the last line is over.

Svenbro follows this initial formality with one of the stiffest and most inelegant lines a poem could serve up: □and thus became the founder of lepidopterology on Swedish soil.□ There is nothing even vaguely poetic about the phrasing (other than the inherent music in the word □lepidopterology□), a fact that Svenbro was surely aware of. He follows that line with one that nearly matches it in terms of blunt functionality: □in his poem psychology took a great step forward.□ Both of these statements would be

considered strong, clear, and succinct if they appeared in an essay, spelling out Svenbro's position without the slightest hesitation. But words like □thus,□ □founder,□ and even □psychology□ are descriptive words, more commonly associated with academics than with art.

There is, of course, no rule that says poets should be limited to using only words that are musical or words that have multiple implications. Artists always work with what they have available to them, making sculptures from scrap iron, music from bells and whistles, and paintings that stare with open eyes at the drudgery of everyday life. The potential problem with Svenbro's shift in tone, from the lofty to the academic, is that such a shift seems to indicate the sort of inconsistency that can cause readers to abandon faith in a work. Each poem is limited to having its own identity, and a shift in tone can be taken as a pretty clear indicator of a split personality. This is not necessarily the case, though. The overriding rule must be that the poet's word choices should serve the poem's overall message. If this poem's message is one of inconsistency, then inconsistency in the tone would be entirely appropriate.

Just before Stiernhielm's name is introduced, the poem foretells its shift in tone with a long phrase telling the story of how the poetic understanding of the butterfly's genesis relates to the scientific understanding of it. Starting in line 11 with □But in the deepest winter,□ Svenbro sets up the background, giving readers the opportunity to put this natural event into the perspective of the history of the human intellect. Before Stiernhielm, both science and poetry had exhausted ways of looking at the butterfly□imagination itself was frozen, moribund. The poem claims that taxonomy was □dried-out,□ a static museum piece, until □something totally unforeseen occurred□: Stiernhielm's poem □The Silk-Worm.□

The complexity of Svenbro's style in □Lepidopterology□ is not obvious, but it is undeniable. After using the first half of the poem to identify a malaise that had ground scientific thought to a halt, linking it to the spent imaginations of poets that were as □dry□ as the pupa's cocoons, he turns the poem over to science, for a while at least. The point at which the poem becomes dry and academic is the point at which Svenbro lets science speak for itself. It is perfectly fitting that Svenbro should explain his recognition for the significance that □The Silk-Worm□ has to psychology by discussing both it and its author with scientific terminology, using a scientist's voice.

There is a reason that this shift in tone is confusing: Stiernhielm is identified primarily as a poet. If this poem were concerned with the author of a treatise or a doctrine, rather than a poem, then Svenbro could more easily use words like □founder□ and □full-fledged□ without seeming to change styles, because the style would clearly be linked to the subject. Read as Svenbro's praise of Stiernhielm as a poet, though, this stiff language seems out of place. Read as Svenbro's description of a historic upheaval in scientific thought, it seems only natural that abstract language should be used.

□Lepidopterology□ is a poem about how butterflies go through a growth process, from frustration to resignation, before they fulfill their full potential. Svenbro establishes that early in the poem and then dismisses it as obvious symbolism. He then draws a parallel

to the process of human understanding, which grew from intellectual stagnation to the poem □The Silk-Worm.□ The poem corresponds with the butterfly's dormant pupa stage, and it leads to a sense of human psychology just as light and beautiful as the butterfly that emerges from a cocoon. Readers who insist that poetry be □beautiful□ understand a poem about butterflies, but they do not know how to react when the butterfly represents science. If Georg Stiernhielm used poetry to bring about a new era of science, then it is only right that Svenbro's poem should go in the same direction, following poetic language with a boxy scientific tone. It may stray from the kind of language that poets usually work with, but Svenbro, as he does throughout his poetry, creates a common ground where the fruits of scientific exploration over the centuries are recognized as natural wonders that are just as worthy of poetic concentration as nature's own fruitful bounty.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on □Lepidopterology,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, she examines the triangle of metaphors that come together at the end of the poem to make a resounding statement about the nature of science, language, and renewed possibility.

In *Three-toed Gull*, Svenbro's first volume of poetry translated into English, the Swedish-born author dedicates much effort to examining things, people, and places in terms of the words that name them. That is, this is a book full of language about language, poetry about poetry. But it is also a book about science and history, philosophy and logic, and even love. Regardless of the translation, it is clear that Svenbro's focus is on words, names, titles, descriptors□essentially, anything that attempts to *identify*. In □Lepidopterology,□ much attention is given to butterflies, as the title of the poem suggests, but there is much more going on than fuzzy critters turning into colorful bugs and flying away. Here, the insects lend identity to both psychology and poetry as well as to themselves, creating a triangle of metaphors, with each □leg□ bearing equal importance.

Metaphor is one of the most common literary devices, and poets put it to good use in much of their work. Expressing ideas by invoking images of various dissimilar objects often leads to new ways of thinking about things. In this poem, caterpillars, butterflies, behavioral science, and a long-dead Swedish poet combine into a motley group of odd kin. But Svenbro manages to weave the language around the images so smoothly and to make connections so easily that what first appears strange and disparate ends up seeming perfectly natural.

The first two of the three central metaphors at work in □Lepidopterology□ are introduced in the first line. The idea of the butterfly's holding □a prominent place in psychology□ is an intriguing notion, and the manner in which Svenbro builds upon it incites curiosity. The biology of the lepidoptera's transformation from caterpillar to pupa to imago, or adult butterfly, is dealt with directly throughout the poem. Caterpillars *do* go through a period of □difficult sloughing,□ as they eat and grow very quickly and must shed their skin several times during this phase of metamorphosis. And when caterpillars become pupae, they experience a kind of □total paralysis,□ as they are unable to eat or even move during this stage. All the action, so to speak, takes place *inside* their bodies□a biological fact that Svenbro cleverly melds with the psychological fact of sleeping and dreaming.

As noted, the physical aspects of metamorphosis are overtly described in the poem, but facets of the second leg of the metaphor triangle□the field of psychology□are only alluded to. The depiction of the lepidoptera's □pupa stage□ as □a period of total paralysis□ turns into a reference to psychology with the addition of the words □of the will.□ While one can make an argument for the ability to use willpower or to possess a will at any level of the taxonomic chart, what is happening to the caterpillar/butterfly here

is purely a function of biology. Human beings, on the other hand, may feel a □total paralysis *of the will*□ (italics added).

Like the butterfly in its pupa stage, human beings also experience a stage of sleep□the □rapid eye movement,□ or REM, stage□in which skeletal muscles are essentially paralyzed. The body may twitch or jerk, but any controlled movement is effectively stopped. However, also like the pupa, there is much action going on inside, at least as far as the brain goes. REM is known in psychology as the period of sleep in which vivid dreams occur, and people awakened during this time often can report the action of the dream in graphic detail. But Svenbro goes a step further with the metaphor by bringing Freudian aspects of psychology into the picture.

Do caterpillars get frustrated? Do they dream? While these may be questions that modern science can never answer definitively, most members of the scientific community would say no. *People*, on the other hand, *do* get frustrated and do dream□so the two together may result in □frustrated dreams.□ Sigmund Freud and many other analytical psychologists assert that dreams hold the key to what is really going on inside a person's mind, because they are just mental manifestations of the subconscious doing what the conscious mind will not allow it to do. In other words, the □superego□ loses its control when the body goes to sleep, and the brain throws an □id□ party. Svenbro, however, does not become specific in naming Freud's noted three aspects of personality (id, ego, and superego). Instead, he lets his biology-turned-poetry make the connections for him.

The image of □high-soaring dreams□ juxtaposed against an □ungainly earthbound body□ conveys a very visual picture of frustration. It is an almost *tangible* look at the □insoluble conflict between dream and reality.□ In essence, the mind wants to fly, but the body is stuck on the ground. More than any other analogy in the poem, this comparison between the biology of the insect and the psychology of the person explains why the butterfly has □held a prominent place□ in the study of humankind. Who has not had an unreachable dream but dreamed about it anyway? Who has not longed for something that seems impossible to obtain but still imagined what it would be like to have it? The caterpillar is simply going through a natural physical process, but a human being's □ungainly earthbound body,□ metaphorically speaking, implies not only impossible dreams but also the sense of despair and hopelessness that often accompanies such frustration. And in Svenbro's poem, it gets worse before it gets better.

As previously noted, pupae neither eat nor move during this stage of development, right before the final one when the butterfly emerges. In □Lepidopterology,□ the poet takes some license with what the pupa's mindset□as though it has one□might be at this time. It appears to be in a state of □total resignation.□ In fact, it is so dejected that it spins □a shroud around its body, / and prepare[s] to die.□ □Shroud,□ of course, is the perfect funereal descriptor to liken the creature's gauzy protective covering to a garment for a dead body. But once again, what the words actually describe is the biological process of the pupa; what they *imply* is the psychological process of an individual who is feeling despondent and hopeless.

The third leg of the metaphor triangle now comes into full play as an obscure Swedish poet, Georg Stiernhielm, is introduced as the savior of the pupa□as well as the savior of the human psyche. Svenbro plainly states that the emergence of the butterfly from the seemingly lifeless pupa □gives us the right to believe in the impossible.□ If there is one main theme in this poem, it is this: never give up; anything is possible.

With a few strokes of the pencil, Stiernhielm delivers the ugly bug from its desolate state to the winds on the wings of a beautiful butterfly. With the same strokes, he propels psychology forward as a □full-fledged science□□saved from its graceless place in the company of rogue theories and pseudosciences. And how does one humble scholar, scientist, and public official in seventeenth-century Sweden accomplish such an admirable feat? With his poetry, of course. With the sheer beauty of language itself□words that set both the butterfly and the study of the human mind free.

□Lepidopterology□ ends on a remarkably positive note. The butterfly's □brilliant and dizzying love□ is a far cry from its previous notion to lie down and die. Psychology has come a long way, too, rising □from its cocoon, its prehistory□ to stand proudly among the respected fields of behavioral and natural sciences. It seems that nature owes a lot to poetry. But note that even Stiernhielm's work that sets all this in motion, □The Silk-Worm,□ becomes □only the shroud left on the ground,□ just like the butterfly's death wrap that it sheds in order to live. The poem, then, must be only a framework. Like the pupa's spun encasement, the poem provides a protective shell in which its fledgling occupant, language, can grow and change and develop. Once the words have ripened, once they have metamorphosed into mature, flourishing articulation, they will break free from the poem's walls and fly on their own. As Svenbro puts it, when the butterfly □finally flies out of language,□ the right to believe in the impossible is affirmed.

If poetry is the third leg of the metaphor triangle, it is also the triangle's glue. It holds the entire structure together. Dissimilar subjects such as lepidopterology and psychology need something to act as a connecter, and language□with its flexibility, playfulness, and downright beauty□does just that. But the overall hopefulness, rejuvenation, and □victory□ that this work deems always possible are not limited to any one aspect of motivating factors. That is, even language itself must not be allowed to put any chains on possibility. *Definitions* must remain fluid and leave room for dynamic and creative meanings. Note that the butterfly flies *out* of language, as though it is indebted to the vehicle that helped it grow but now needs the freedom to do as it pleases on its own. Only complete independence assures the continuous unfolding of possibility.

That said, however, there is little doubt that language and words and their relationships with *things* are of paramount importance in Svenbro's work. This is evident in his poem □A Critique of Pure Representation,□ the first poem to appear in *Three-toed Gull* and a work that sets the stage for several subsequent poems in the collection, including □Lepidopterology.□ In □Critique,□ Svenbro notes: □In order to restore to the words their semantic roughness / I told myself that there was no difference / between the stone I held in my hand and the word 'stone' / clattering in language.□ Here, □stone□ is both a word and a thing, and, while they have a congenial relationship, each one enjoys an identity independent of the other. □Stone□ may represent the thing □stone□ in some

instances, but neither is limited by the connection. And it is no surprise that Svenbro uses a rock metaphor to make a point about something else□something human: □To each and every one the possibility of speaking on his own behalf / without being represented by somebody else / and to the words the possibility of representing themselves.□

In □Lepidopterology,□ the butterfly, the field of psychology, and the art of poetry all strive for the possibility of speaking for themselves. One needs only to consider the image projected by the poem's final three lines to believe they all achieve it. The □victory announced□ is nearly audible, and it is made even visible with phrases like □ablaze in the sun□ and □brilliant and dizzying love.□ If ever a poem had a happy ending (and so many do not!), this is it. But Svenbro does a masterly job at keeping it from sliding into sentimental schmaltz. Instead, he brings together his triangle of metaphors with skillful precision and uses it to make a profound statement about the nature of relationships among a variety of subjects□and the unlimited possibility that underlies them all.

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

Topics for Further Study

Svenbro is an accomplished classicist in Paris. How does scholarly work influence poems such as □Lepidopterology?□ Read a section from one of Svenbro's articles or scholarly books, such as *The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric* (1996), in order to form your answer.

Research the history of lepidopterology. Who are the key historical lepidopterologists? How have they advanced the goal of this scientific branch? How have attitudes toward lepidopterology changed over time? What work is currently being done in lepidopterology?

Poetry has played a unique and prominent role in Swedish history and culture. Research this tradition and Svenbro's place within it. How does Svenbro incorporate Swedish identity into his poetry? What is his relationship with the other poets of his generation? How does □Lepidopterology□ evoke Swedish history and culture?

Research the development of the science of psychology in Western civilization. Describe some of the most important periods in the history of psychology. Who were the key psychologists in the Renaissance and in the twentieth century, and why were they important? When has the butterfly been used as a symbol or metaphor for human psychology and why? Discuss how the history of psychology relates to Svenbro's poem.

What Do I Read Next?

Svenbro's poem □Polyphony□ (2003) uses an organ (the musical instrument) as a metaphor for the human body in order to dramatize the expression of love in the polyphonic human voice. It relates in many interesting ways (including its use of personification and conceit to explore the nature of the human psyche) to □Lepidopterology,□ which immediately precedes it in *Three-toed Gull*.

Tomas Tranströmer's *New Collected Poems* (1997), edited and translated by Robin Fulton, includes this eminent Swedish poet's most influential work. From the elegant □17 Poems□ to the challenging □The Sad Gondola,□ it offers an excellent introduction to a poet whose work has influenced Svenbro.

The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric (1996), by Svenbro and John Scheid, is an analytical commentary on Greek and Roman myth and society, with a focus on weaving□a central concept in classical thought□and its significance in the literature and culture of the ancients.

Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* (1998) is a brilliant novel in verse, in which a young man named Geryon falls in love with the fascinating but cruel Herakles. Incorporating classical mythology into contemporary life, Carson portrays Geryon as a red monster like the creature from Herakles's famous tenth labor, but a monster with a sweet and noble soul.

Further Study

Fulton, Robin, ed. and trans., *Five Swedish Poets*, Norvik Press, 1998.

In this compelling volume, the respected critic and translator Robin Fulton provides selections from the contemporary Swedish poets Kjell Espmark, Lennart Sjogren, Staffan Soderblom, Werner Aspenstrom, and Eva Strom, including a brief critical introduction to each.

Moffett, Judith, ed. and trans., *The North! To the North!: Five Swedish Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2001.

This collection of nineteenth-century Swedish poets provides useful background information about Svenbro and the post-World War II poetry scene in Sweden.

Smith, William Jay, and Leif Sjöberg, eds., *The Forest of Childhood: Poems from Sweden*, New Rivers Press, 1996.

Smith and Sjöberg's collection of contemporary Swedish poems helps place Svenbro in his literary context.

Warme, Lars G., ed., *A History of Swedish Literature*, University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

This useful and comprehensive reference work traces Swedish literature from its beginnings through the contemporary era, outlining the context of major Swedish literary figures, including Georg Stiernhielm, and discussing how literature has helped develop Swedish identity.

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Matthias, John, and Lars-Håkan Svensson, "Translators' Notes," in *Three-toed Gull*, by Jesper Svenbro, translated by John Matthias and Lars-Håkan Svensson, Northwestern University Press, 2003, p. 131.

Svenbro, Jesper, *Three-toed Gull*, translated by John Matthias and Lars-Håkan Svensson, Northwestern University Press, 2003, pp. 5-7, 10, 16-18, 23.

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Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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.

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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.

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Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535