The Litany Study Guide

The Litany by Dana Gioia

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Dana Gioia's collection of poetry *Interrogations at Noon* (2001), which includes his poem □The Litany,□ has been praised for its lyricism as well as its classic sense of subject and theme. One of the strongest poems in the collection, □The Litany□ makes a powerful statement of love and loss and of the search for a way to comprehend the nature of suffering. These became common themes in Gioia's poetry after the tragic death of his son at four months of age. Gioia's verse collection *The Gods of Winter* (1991) expresses his pain over his son's death; his later work is less personal but still focuses on the subject of loss.

In □The Litany,□ Gioia makes a confessional investigation of the nature of life and death and the universal design of that nature. Each stanza lists things the speaker has lost. These losses include someone he has loved as well as his faith in his religion, which had taught him to believe in the rightness of the cycle of life and death. His questioning of this cycle becomes an expression of grief.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1950

Michael Dana Gioia was born on December 24, 1950, in Los Angeles, California, to a tightly knit family headed by his Italian father, Michael, and his Mexican American mother, Dorothy. His father was a cabdriver and store owner, and his mother was a telephone operator. Gioia rose from these humble beginnings through the academic world by earning a scholarship to Stanford University and obtaining a bachelor of science with honors there in 1973, as well as winning an award for the best senior essay. He went on to earn two master's degrees, one from Harvard University in 1975, where he studied with the poets Robert Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Bishop, and one from Stanford University in 1977.

Gioia's initial course of study was music, but he soon turned to literature. At Stanford, he had book reviews published in the *Stanford Daily* and served as editor of the campus literary magazine, *Sequoia*. His time at Harvard helped him cement his poetic aspirations, but he began to doubt whether academia was the best place to foster his talents. As a result, after completing course work for a PhD, but without finishing the degree, he left for Stanford Business School.

After graduation, Gioia joined General Foods Cooperation and made his way up the corporate structure, first as manager of business development (1977-1987), then as marketing manager (1988-1990), and finally as vice president of marketing (1990-1992). He continued to write poetry during these years, and, after he began to receive national recognition for his work, he left the business world to devote himself full time to writing.

Gioia married Mary Hiecke on February 23, 1980; the couple had three sons, one of whom died in infancy. His verse collection *The Gods of Winter* is dedicated to this son. Gioia established himself in the literary world first as a critic, with such essays as □The New Conservatism in American Poetry,□ published in *American Book Review* in 1986, and □Notes on the New Formalism,□ which appeared in the *Hudson Review* in 1987. His first collection of poems, *Daily Horoscope* (1986), won acclaim in America and Britain.

Gioia's literary reputation was firmly established with the publications of *The Gods of Winter* in 1991 and *Interrogations at Noon* in 2001, which includes □The Litany.□ His work earned him the Frederick Bock Prize in Poetry in 1985 and the American Book Award in 2002 for *Interrogations at Noon*. He became more famous, however, for his essay □Can Poetry Matter?,□ published in the *Atlantic Monthly* and available in *Can Poetry Matter?: Essays on Poetry and American Culture*. In this essay, Gioia complains that the public's lack of interest in reading poetry is a result of the genre's growing inaccessibility.

In January 2002, President George W. Bush appointed Gioia chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts following the untimely death of Michael P. Hammond after only one week in the office. Gioia's appointment came at a time of Republican attacks on the NEA that were part of the wave of culturally conservative views sweeping the United States.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

□The Litany□ begins with the speaker calling attention to the poem as □a litany□ in the first stanza, repeating the title phrase. The word *litany* can have two meanings: a series of prayers spoken or sung at a Christian worship service, asking for God's blessing, or a long, repetitious list of items that are usually considered complaints or problems. Both would be appropriate definitions here, since the poem is about □lost things,□ as noted in the first line.

The speaker finds another way to describe the litany in the second line, as a □canon.□ There are several definitions of this word, too, but the most relevant ones□which would suggest another term for litany as it is used in the first line□would be a body of religious or artistic works; the most solemn part of the Mass, or Holy Communion; and a list of Catholic saints.

The speaker notes that he has lost possessions, that they have become dispossessed (expelled or ejected) without his consent. He lists the things lost: a photograph, an old address, and a key, perhaps all relating to the same person. The litany then becomes a list of words to memorize or forget. The words could be part of a liturgical prayer or a list of the things lost. He then adds to the list the Latin words □*amo amas amat*,□ which is the conjugation of the verb □to love□: □I love; you love; he or she loves.□ The speaker is not sure whether he should memorize or forget these words. The □dead tongue□ refers to Latin, which is considered to be a dead language. In the last line, he declares that □the final sentence□ of that language □has been spoken.□

Stanza 2

In this stanza, the speaker moves from a personal focus to a description of landscape, listing different types on which rain falls. The rain falls to the earth indifferently, apathetically. It completes the cycle of life as it rises up again □without our agency□ (that is, without our help) to the clouds.

Stanza 3

In this stanza, the list becomes the speaker's □prayer to unbelief,□ to □guttering□ candles, and to incense drifting emptily. The prayer is likened to □the smile of a stone Madonna,□ to □the silent fury of the consecrated wine,□ and to □a benediction on the death of a young god.□ All the items in the stanza are found in Christian worship services.

Stanza 4

Here the litany becomes a list or a prayer to □earth and ashes,□ to dust, to fine silt, □a prayer to praise what we become.□ This wasteland, with its dusty roads and vacant rooms and silt settling □indifferently□ on the objects in the rooms, is the backdrop for the scripture that the speaker quotes: □Dust thou art, to dust thou shalt return.□ The cycle of life and death, which in the second stanza was the cycle of rain falling and evaporating, now becomes focused on human death, as the body turns to ashes and dust after going into the grave. This cycle tastes bitter to the speaker.

Stanza 5

The first line in this stanza again insists that the poem is a prayer but that it is □inchoate□ (unclear or unformed) and □unfinished.□ For the first time, the speaker identifies the person to whom the poem is addressed. This □you□ is loved by the speaker and apparently lost to him. The reference to □lesion□ suggests that the memory of this person is like a painful wound. The prayer becomes a □rosary□ of words, a series of prayers, like a litany or like the string of beads used to count the prayers recited. But these words □count out / time's illusions.□ The illusions the speaker refers to are that the □past / existed somewhere□ and that it could be □claimed,□ suggesting that the person that he had loved is gone.

Stanza 6

The first line in the final stanza continues the thought from the last. The prayer now becomes □our□ litany, which is the poem itself. The speaker apparently shifts from speaking to the one who was lost, the □you,□ who died, to a different person, whom he calls □*mon vieux*□ (my old one). This new person is a reader and a voyeur, looking in on the speaker's suffering.

In the final lines, the speaker refers back to the cycle of the rain falling to earth and then rising again but finds a more positive way to view it. The water falls down into a gorge and the mist steams upward. This process becomes a □paradox□ of rising and falling, life and death. As the mist swirls skyward it becomes luminous□a symbol of □our□ life, our litany, our death.

Themes

The Artistic Impulse

The impulse to communicate artistically becomes a dominant theme in the poem. The speaker reveals this need from the first line, when the poem becomes a □litany of lost things.□ All but the final stanza begin with the word □this,□ which refers to the poem itself and continually calls attention to it. This structure helps reinforce the confessional tone of the poem, as the speaker addresses first the lost loved one and then the reader of the poem.

The act of constructing the lists in the poem appears to help the speaker sort out his responses to the loss of the loved one and the subsequent loss of faith in his religion's ability to help ease his suffering. The development of his thoughts can be followed, as he moves back and forth from the universal focus on nature's cycle of life and death to his personal response to the death of someone he loved. Each list that he constructs for the poem helps him clarify and communicate his point of view.

The power of art to provide a sense of unity becomes apparent in the final stanza when the speaker addresses the reader, who shares in the universal nature of his suffering. The acknowledgment of this sympathetic understanding between poet and reader appears to trigger the speaker's more unified and therefore more satisfying vision of nature's cycle. What had previously appeared to be an □indifferent□ world now becomes a paradoxical one that unites contrasting images of life and death in the rising and falling of the river. After the speaker has successfully communicated his vision to his reader, he can then turn to the living world of the present.

Influence of the Past

The powerful influence that the past can have on the present is reflected in the suffering the speaker experiences. The poem begins with the sense of loss, reinforced by memories of a loved one who has died. The speaker feels dispossessed when he looks at a photograph, an address, and a key, objects that somehow relate to the person he has lost. One of the central questions of the poem centers on whether the speaker should remember or forget the love (□*amo, amas, amat*□) he has experienced in order to lessen the pain of remembrance.

He is unable to escape the past, however, as it colors his vision of the present and of the future. Because his memory has become a painful □lesion,□ his vision of the world has darkened. Nature imposes a cycle of life and death that is indifferent to the sufferings of humanity. Time appears to stop in the vacant rooms as mortals return to the dust of the grave. This world seems to offer no salvation for the dead or for the living.

The overwhelming presence of the past becomes most obvious as the speaker directly addresses the loved one, trying to construct a prayer that will not be □inchoate and unfinished.□ He struggles to find the language that will offer his loved one a clear benediction and himself a respite from his pain. He realizes that the past can never, unlike an inheritance, be claimed. It is only through the acceptance and expression of suffering that the speaker can find any relief from the burden of the past.

Style

Repetition of Word or Image

The poem uses repetition of the same word at the beginning of several verses for thematic emphasis. Five of six stanzas begin with □This is□ followed by either □litany,□ □liturgy,□ or □prayer□□all used in a similar way to emphasize the loss of a loved one as well as the loss of faith. The variation in the three words reflects the dual nature of the loss. A litany could be a series of prayers or a list, having both a religious and a secular connotation. Yet the repetition of the word and its variations implies that the one loss, that of a loved one, has caused the other loss, that of faith in the rightness of the cycle of life.

Images are also repeated in stanzas 2, 4, and 6 to reinforce the focus on this cycle. In stanza 2, the life-giving part of the cycle emerges as rain falls on a mountain, a field, and an ocean and then rises to become clouds that will eventually turn into rain. In the fourth stanza, the speaker focuses on death as the body returns to the earth, to the dust from which it was formed. The final stanza reveals the entire cycle of life and death as the river rises and falls, □luminous□ as it □vanishes.□

Repetition of Sound

Gioia also uses the repetition of speech sounds for emphasis throughout the poem. In the first stanza alone, there are several instances of both consonance, the repetition of consonants, and assonance, the repetition of vowel sounds. Examples of consonance are □litany□ and □lost□; □*amo, amas, amat*□; □is□ and □list□; and □sentence□ and □spoken.□ The linking of □litany□ and □lost□ reinforces the poem's main focus: things lost. The repeated sounds in the Latin conjugation of the verb □to love□ emphasizes that the most painful loss is that of a loved one. The consonance in the last example in this stanza alludes to the loss of faith, which has prevented the speaker from finding a vocabulary to describe his loss.

Assonance occurs with the vowel sounds in □this□ and □litany□; □it,□ □is,□ and □list□; and □photograph□ and □old.□ The repetition of the vowel sounds in the first two words points out the relationship between the construction of the poem (□this,□ meaning the poem itself) and the speaker's feelings of loss (his □litany□). The last example of assonance links details relating to the one lost. The words □possessions□ and □dispossessed□ contain both consonance and assonance and connect the fact of loss to the emotional response to it. Gioia's repetition of sounds also creates a musicality that adds a sense of unity and pleasure to reading the poem.

Confession

The poem creates a controlled confessional tone. Confessional poetry, a term first linked to Robert Lowell's lyric collection *Life Studies* (1959) and later to the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, expresses intimate details of the poet's life. This poetry differs from that of the nineteenth-century Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley in that it explores the poet's experience with more candor. Typical subjects for the confessional poet include sexual encounters and extreme emotional states, often involving mental instability, drug use, and suicide.

In □The Litany,□ Gioia alternates between a confessional and an investigatory style. He expresses a personal sense of loss when he identifies the litany of the poem as a prayer to an unidentified □you,□ a □young god□ who has died and is □rotting on a tree,□ most likely referring to both his infant son and the crucified Jesus. Yet he couples his sorrow with an investigation of the nature of the cycle of life and death and the ability of faith to ease suffering. This duality helps the poem achieve a more universal status.

Historical Context

The New Formalists

New formalism is a poetic movement, led by Gioia, that rejects the dominance of free verse (poetry that is not organized into recurrent units of stressed and unstressed syllables) in contemporary poetry. New formalists promote, instead, a return to traditional poetic meters (recurring regular units of speech sounds in a poem), rhymes, and stanza forms. Gioia, along with other new formalists like Charles Martin, Tom Disch, Phillis Levin, and Frederick Turner, has generated a sometimes heated discussion on the importance of prosody (the study of meter, rhyme, and stanza form) and the influence of past literary values. The theories of these poets are outlined in essays like Alan Shapiro's □The New Formalism,□ in *Critical Inquiry*, and Gioia's □Notes on the New Formalism,□ published in *Conversant Essays: Contemporary Poets and Poetry* (1990), edited by James McCorkle. In his discussion, Gioia insists that attention to form does not limit a poet but, in essence, frees the poet to expand the impact of the poem.

The new formalists emerged from a group called the □Movement,□ formed during the 1950s by British poets, including Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, John Wain, and Elizabeth Jennings. Like their formalist predecessors, they stress a unity of emotion and language in poetry rather than the intellectual exercises they claim are being taught in academia. The new formalists take as their model the lyric of the nineteenth-century British writer Thomas Hardy, which is a carefully metered lyric stanza that contains direct, common language rather than poetic diction. The members of this movement have sparked important debates about the future of poetry and its relationship to the reading public.

New Oral Poetry

In Gioia's essay collection *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture* (2004), he explores, in the title essay, the ways in which popular culture can help revive the public's interest in poetry. He argues that hip-hop and cowboy poetry and events like poetry slams, which depend on the oral presentation of verse, have become important new cultural forms. In an assessment of Gioia's title essay for *Wilson Quarterly*, the reviewer notes that □new popular poetry uses modern-day media such as radio, CDs, video, and the Internet . . . to attract a general audience that is less and less inclined to devote time to reading.□

Hip-hop developed in the 1970s with the emergence of artists like the Last Poets, whose songs contained a mixture of spoken word and jazz background rhythms that expressed the African American experience. Gioia insists that hip-hop's fixed rhythms and rhyme schemes resemble those of English oral poetry, from Anglo-Saxon verse to Rudyard Kipling's ballads. The genre was promoted by Cool Herc, an influential disc jockey in New York City. Hip-hop artists like LL Cool J and Grand Master Flash have helped hip-hop maintain its popularity.

Poetry slams, which give poets a venue where they can perform their poetry in front of live audiences, first appeared in the mid-1980s. They may have been inspired by the open-microphone sessions for poets in a Chicago bar started by the poet Marc Smith. Slams are held in bars and cafés where poet-performers compete for top honors, awarded by a panel or the audience. In 2002, Russell Simmons, owner of Def Jam Records, reflected the popularity of the events when he opened a poetry slam on Broadway.

Cowboy poetry, which became a popular form during the settlement of the American frontier, reemerged in 1985 at a meeting of poets led by the folklorist Hal Cannon in Nevada. This poetry, which began as tall tales and folk songs told and sung around a campfire, expresses the culture and lifestyles of the West. It is also characterized by its regional dialects, its traditional ballad form (a sung narrative that contains quatrains with alternate four- and three-stress lines, with the second and fourth line rhyming), and its combination of realism (a literary movement that stresses accuracy in the representation of life) and romanticism (a movement that represents a world more picturesque and adventurous than real). Among the most famous cowboy poets are Buster Black and Clayton Atkin.

Critical Overview

Gioia's collection *Interrogations at Noon* has been well received for its technical artistry as well as its thematic import. Bruce F. Murphy, in his review of the collection for *Poetry*, praises the poet's □fluency and passion□ and concludes, □In terms of lyricism, Dana Gioia is a virtuoso, it seems. Tones are augmented or diminished with great care. The poems are lyrical, fluid, assured; this is a poetry free of mistakes.□ Murphy insists that Gioia □embraces not only traditional measures, but traditional philosophy. The world exists independently of our thinking/speaking about it, and so the role of language is mimetic [something that mimics], not constitutive [something that constructs].□

Ned Balbo, in his review of the collection for the *Antioch Review*, claims that the poet is □a master of subtle registers□ and insists that □elegiac in his outlook, Gioia is more likely to lower his voice than shout.□ He □sees the metaphors we live with every day.□

In a discussion of theme, Murphy writes that Gioia □hints at the moral dimension of poetry.□ In all of the poems, Murphy finds a □sense of conscience, of being held to account.□ He argues that □behind its surface brilliance and the sometimes casual, occasional subjects, it is a very somber book. There are depths of sorrow that are refracted through form, and sometimes fully unveiled.□ Gioia's verse, Murphy claims, is a □public poetry that retains a sense of privacy, and a feeling for the limits of language.□ The □bottled-up suffering, when it finds an opening, comes out in a fierce jet. Death is everywhere present, as a desire for release from the unendurable.□

Balbo concludes that Gioia speaks □with impressive gravity and range about what lies at the dark heart of human affairs,□ yet he □can lighten a dark moment or finely shade a lighter one.□ His poems are □superb in their blend of toughness and vulnerability, their quest for solace before loss, their measured yet memorable voice.□ Balbo concludes that though the collection □often speaks of death and absence, it offers the consolation of uncommon craft.□

In his review of the collection for *Booklist*, Ray Olson notes that Gioia has obviously studied the classics of Greek and Roman literature, which teach that □the human heart is never satisfied.□ He argues that Gioia reveals a □formal dexterity□ in his verse and has □learned the turbulent heart in the content□ of his poems. Gioia □draws on Greek and Roman motifs, stories, and attitudes□ and □conveys to us the acceptance of mortality and the celebration of beauty that have made the classics perdurably [long-lastingly] relevant.□ His □true□ rhymes, □correct and musical□ meters, and □fresh□ diction suggest, Olson claims, that □he is well on the way to becoming a classic poet himself.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Wendy Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, she explores the interplay of the subjects of love, loss, and faith in the poem.

In his poem □Design,□ Robert Frost chooses as his subject nature's cycle of life and death and examines its design. The poem is focused on a seemingly insignificant event: the death of a moth. Frost describes how the moth is attracted to a flower where a spider is lying in wait for its breakfast. He notes that this scene can be viewed as an illustration of the life cycle, an illustration that the moth must die so that the spider can live. In his description of the event, Frost questions whether this cycle has been consciously designed or is the result of random occurrence. His questioning comes from his awareness of the suffering that is a consequence of this cycle. Frost often explored the subjects of death and suffering in his poetry, especially after his son committed suicide.

Gioia also turned to the subject of death in his poetry after his infant son died. His work focuses on the suffering associated with death but does not question whether the cycle of life and death is part of a universal design. In □The Litany,□ one of his most compelling explorations of this theme, Gioia centers on the experience of death for those left behind.

In □Design,□ Frost's struggle to come to terms with death is evident in the juxtaposition of positive and negative imagery in the first stanza. The three participants in the event□the flower, the moth, and the spider□become □assorted characters of death and blight□ in one line and □mixed ready to begin the morning right□ in another. In these two lines, Frost contrasts the rightness of nature's cycle with the recognition that death and blight are a part of that cycle. In the next line, the three characters become □the ingredients of a witches' broth,□ suggesting a □design of darkness to appall.□ Here, Frost implies that the creator of this cycle may have had a sinister intent.

Gioia's speaker never doubts that the universe has been designed by God or suggests that God's intentions were disturbing. His focus instead is on the suffering caused by death and the role faith plays in relation to that suffering. The poem's juxtaposition of secular and religious images calls into question the ability of faith to help alleviate the pain of loss.

The speaker begins his thoughtful probing in the first stanza, which reveals him to be engaged in an investigatory process while, at the same time, isolated as a result of his loss. Here he starts to question and reevaluate his experience in order to comprehend and cope with it. He first defines his loss as a litany of □things.□ The use of the word □litany,□ which means either a list of complaints or prayers spoken at a Christian service, highlights the dual nature of his focus: the loss and the question of whether faith can help one cope with that loss.

The speaker's tone contains a touch of bitterness as he declares that his possessions have been □dispossessed,□ taken against his will. This word also suggests that, as a result of the loss, he has become dispossessed, or homeless. The two losses that the speaker has experienced, a loved one and the power of his religious faith to ease his suffering, have caused this sense of homelessness. These losses are revealed in the second half of the stanza, where the speaker notes the influence of the past on the present when he wonders whether he should remember or forget the conjugation of the verb □to love.□ The following stanzas illustrate the pain caused by the memory of the loved one, who is now lost, and the inability of faith to relieve that pain. At this point, the language of his religion, expressed in litanies, liturgies, and prayers, has become □a dead tongue / in which the final sentence has been spoken.□

Like Frost's speaker in □Design,□ the speaker in □The Litany□ turns to a description of nature's cycle, moving from a personal to a universal focus as he describes the process of rain falling on the landscape and then evaporating back into the clouds. Yet, like the speaker in Frost's poem, he is unable to keep from including his response when he determines that the rain, which engages in a □complete□ process of life and death, is nevertheless □indifferent□ to the sufferings that the process causes. He recognizes that we are unable to stop this cycle, which continues □without our agency.□

The personal tone gains intensity in the third stanza when the speaker's sadness combines with unrestrained bitterness. Here, the speaker reveals the failure of his faith to ease his pain. At this point, he does not believe that the ceremonial candles will conquer the darkness or that the incense will carry his prayers to heaven. The Madonna, who has previously offered him comfort, is now silent stone, and the consecrated wine expresses not salvation through the blood of Christ but fury over □the death of a young god,□ a reference to a loss of faith as well as the loss of the loved one.

Gioia turns from scriptural to allegorical allusions in the next stanza, which help add a universal as well as personal focus. The wasteland imagery in the fourth stanza reinforces the speaker's sense of desolation in the face of an indifferent world. Nature's cycle is again described, but here the imagery is darker. All life seems to have ended in the vacant rooms that contain an eternal silence, reflecting □what we become□ as we return to the dust that we are. This prayer tastes of □the bitterness of earth and ashes.□

The confessional intimacy of the fifth stanza adds a sad poignancy to the poem. The speaker admits that his prayer for conciliation is □inchoate and unfinished,□ because his suffering has not abated. For the first time, he speaks directly to the lost one and to the memory that has become a painful □lesion.□ His rosary cannot offer benediction, because the words he recites in prayer only □count out time's / illusions.□ As he recognizes that the past can never be reclaimed, the speaker turns to a new audience, the reader of his poem, and to the □litany□ of loss that is universally shared.

The reader is a voyeur who shares in the speaker's suffering, an acknowledgment that appears to offer some comfort to the speaker. When he returns to a description of

nature's cycle, he now seems to find a paradox in the rising and falling of the river. The cycle of life and death represented by the river not only shatters and splinters but also becomes □luminous□ in its inevitable progress □skyward,□ bringing with it a suggestion of salvation for the dead as well as for the living. In his rendering of the speaker's need in □The Litany□ to come to an ultimate acceptance of death as part of God's design, Gioia creates an eloquent statement of the often-suffocating aftermath of loss and the intense desire to comprehend it.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on □The Litany,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Read Gioia's □Notes on the New Formalism□ and investigate the responses to it. Lead a class discussion and assessment of his vision of the future of poetry.

Gioia uses the technique of listing in the poem, much as Walt Whitman does in his poetry but with different effects. Read one of Whitman's poems, such as □Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking□ or □When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer,□ and compare in an essay his lists with those in □The Litany.□ Consider why each author chose the objects in the list and how they help express the poems' themes.

Investigate the stages of grieving that a person goes through when a loved one dies. Chart these stages and any appearance of them in the poem in a PowerPoint presentation.

Write a short story or poem about the speaker in □The Litany,□ envisioning him twenty years from now.

What Do I Read Next?

A Death in the Family (1957), by James Agee, is a tragic tale of the effect of a man's death on his family.

For a comparative study of American poetry, read Richard Howard's *Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States since 1950* (1980).

Gioia dedicated *The Gods of Winter* (1991) to his son who died from sudden infant death syndrome. Several of the poems in the volume deal with the subject of death.

Gioia's essay □Can Poetry Matter?,□ published in *Can Poetry Matter?: Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (2002), presents his controversial views of the status of poetry in America in the early part of the twenty-first century.

Further Study

Bawer, Bruce, □The Poet in the Gray Flannel Suit,□ in *Connoisseur*, March 1989, pp. 108-112.

Bawer presents a comprehensive overview of Gioia and his work.

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, *On Death and Dying*, Scribners, 1997.

This important study explores ways to cope with the end of life.

McPhillips, Robert, □Reading the New Formalists,□ in *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 97, Winter 1989, pp. 73-96.

McPhillips examines the doctrines of the new formalists, including Gioia.

Turco, Lewis, □Neoformalism in Contemporary American Poetry,□ in his *The Public Poet: Five Lectures on the Art and Craft of Poetry*, Ashland Poetry Press, 1991, pp. 39-56.

Lewis adds to the discussion his interpretations of this new school of literary criticism.

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□□□, *Interrogations at Noon*, Graywolf Press, 2001, pp. 10-11.

□Hip-Hop Bards,□ in the *Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 4, Autumn 2003, pp. 105-106.

Murphy, Bruce F., □Music and Lyrics,□ in *Poetry*, Vol. 179, No. 5, February 2002, pp. 283, 290, 291.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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