Lost in Translation Study Guide

Lost in Translation by James Merrill

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

□Lost in Translation□ was first published in the *New Yorker* on April 6, 1974. It later became part of James Merrill's collection *Divine Comedies*, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1976. This work, and the subsequent award, helped cement Merrill's reputation as one of the top young American poets.

The poem is a complex study of loss and the artistic rendering of experience. Merrill presents fragments of experience that become apt metaphors of loss and dislocation in a post-Vietnam, post-Watergate world. The poem's fragmented, yet ultimately unified form highlights the contradictory nature of the creation of art, as the artist strives to □translate□ experience into the stylized structure of a poem.

Merrill focuses on the speaker's memories of his childhood at the point when his parents were separating and he was struggling to adapt to his newly disrupted world. The boy anxiously awaits the arrival of a puzzle, which he and his French nanny will put together. When the puzzle finally arrives, it comes alive to him, as it evolves into a metaphor for his own experience. As the pieces of the puzzle □translate□ into a unified, meaningful whole, Merrill explores the tensions between art and reality and the problems inherent in establishing an absolute vision of human experience.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1926

Deathdate: 1995

James Ingram Merrill was born in New York City on March 3, 1926, to Charles Merrill, a stockbroker and cofounder of the firm Merrill Lynch, and Helen Ingram, a newspaper publisher. Merrill developed an appreciation for languages at a young age, when he learned French and German from his governess, who appears in his poem "Lost in Translation." His parents encouraged his poetry writing during his adolescence. This was apparent when Merrill's father had a collection of Merrill's poetry, *Jim's Book*, published when his son was only sixteen.

Merrill attended Amherst College, where he first met Robert Frost, one of his major influences. He had to leave Amherst from 1944 to 1945 to serve in the U.S. Army at the end of World War II. After the war, he returned to college, had his first book of poems printed privately under the title *The Black Swan* (1946), and graduated from Amherst summa cum laude in 1947.

After college, Merrill moved back to New York City to write. However, he found the atmosphere of the city too distracting, so he decided instead to travel throughout Europe for the next two and a half years with his companion, David Jackson. Merrill's memoir, *A Different Person* (1993), describes this period in Europe.

In 1951, *First Poems*, his first trade book, was published and received favorable reviews. In 1955, he moved to Stonington, Connecticut, with Jackson. Merrill then founded the Ingram Merrill Foundation, an organization that awards grants to artists and writers. His first novel, *The Seraglio*, was published in 1957. Two years later, he and Jackson moved to Athens, Greece.

In the years following the move, Merrill's poetry gained acclaim, and he cemented his reputation as one of the top young American poets. In 1976, he won the Pulitzer Prize for *Divine Comedies*, which includes the poem "Lost in Translation." He received several other awards for his work, including the National Book Award in Poetry in 1967 for *Nights and Days*, the Bollingen Prize in 1973 for *Braving the Elements*, a second National Book Award for *Mirabell: Books of Number* in 1978, the National Book Critics Circle Award for his epic poem *The Changing Light at Sandover* in 1982, and the first Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize in poetry awarded by the Library of Congress for *The Inner Room* in 1990. He was also a finalist for the National Book Award in fiction for *The (Diblos) Notebook* in 1965. Merrill served as a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 1979 until his death in 1995. He died in Tucson, Arizona, at age sixty-eight from a heart attack brought on by complications of AIDS .

Plot Summary

Stanzas 1-3

The opening quotation of □Lost in Translation□ is from a translation by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) of lines 61-64 in the poem □Palme□ by the French poet Paul Valéry (1871-1945). Rilke writes, as Merrill quotes:

Diese Tage, die leer dir scheinen

und wertlos für das All

haben Wurzeln zwischen den Steinen

und trinken dort überall.

These lines in English would be □These days, which seem empty / and entirely fruitless to you, / have roots between the stones / and drink from everywhere.□ This passage announces two of the subjects of the poem: translation and search for meaning. The first three lines of the poem itself then create an atmosphere of anticipation as a boy waits in □daylight□ and □lamplight□ for a □puzzle which keeps never coming.□ The juxtaposition of □tense□ and □oasis□ in the description of the tabletop in line 4 suggests that the puzzle will provide pleasure for the boy, but pain if it never arrives. This juxtaposition is extended into the next two lines as life becomes either a rising □mirage□ or something falling □into place.□

In lines 8 through 11, the speaker lists the activities the boy engages in during his □summer without parents,□ cared for by his governess. The activities do not seem pleasurable to the boy, as he notes the □sour windfalls of the orchard□ behind them. The speaker indicates the real cause of his unease when he notes that the boy's parents are absent, suggesting that this is a □puzzle□ to the boy, □or should be.□ The stanza ends where it began, with the boy's impatience over the missing puzzle, which he notes in his diary (□Line-a-Day□).

In the second stanza, the speaker notes that the boy is in love with his governess, whose husband died in Verdun, a World War I battle. The religious governess, □Mademoiselle,□ prays for him, as does a French priest, and helps him put on puppet shows. She talks with him at night about pre-World War II tensions in Europe and her □French hopes, German fears.□ Mademoiselle knows little more than the □grief and hardship□ she has suffered.

The two continue to wait for the puzzle as even Mademoiselle's watch becomes impatient, □[throwing] up its hands.□ She tries to alleviate the boy's □steaming bitterness□ with sweets, an act that translates as telling him to □have patience, my dear,□ which is expressed in French (□Patience, chéri□) and in German (□Geduld, mein Schatz□), the two languages she has been teaching him.

The lines evoke a memory in the speaker, who digresses in a parenthetical passage to present time. He notes that the other evening he remembered reading something by Valéry that triggered a memory of Rilke's translation of Valéry's □Palme,□ which appears at the beginning of the poem. He makes the connection between Valéry's poem and the boy's situation, admitting here that he is the boy. The thought of the tree in that poem, which has □roots between the stones and drink[s] from everywhere,□ becomes a □sunlit paradigm.□ It is a model for him of □patience in the blue,□ (□patience dans l'azur□), a characterization of the slow growth of the palm tree. He goes back to the past when he tries to translate the French words into their German equivalents, asking Mademoiselle hypothetically if he is correct.

In the third stanza, the promised puzzle appears from a New York City shop and has a thousand wooden pieces, smelling like sandalwood. Some pieces have shapes he has seen before in other puzzles, including a □branching palm□ that the speaker insists was really there and not just imagined. Mademoiselle excitedly spreads out the pieces that initially look like □incoherent faces in a crowd,□ before a pattern can be discerned. Each piece will eventually be placed together by □law,□ the design of the puzzle maker. The □plot thickens□ as the pieces interlock and become a story.

Stanza 4

In the first line of the fourth stanza, Mademoiselle attends to the puzzle's borders, but the speaker jumps immediately to the future, this time to an evening in London, the past December. People are gathered in □the library□ for a demonstration by a psychic. The audience has seen an object hidden in a casket behind a panel before he arrived. The psychic shuts his eyes and tries to visualize the object. He sees something in the object's history that may involve the chopping down of trees, □groaning and cracking□ as they approach a lumber mill.

What the psychic has been describing is the process of making a puzzle piece from plywood. He suggests that the process appears to be complex, but it is not complex compared with the □hazard and craft,□ the fate (□karma□), that made its original matter. This process of making a puzzle piece, along with arranging the pieces to form the puzzle, can be likened to the creative process of the poet. After the psychic identifies the piece, he opens his eyes and is applauded. The speaker, however, feels an unidentified sense of dread, perhaps a result of the contemplation of □karma,□ and immediately turns his attention once more to the past.

Stanzas 5-6

The next stanza continues the focus on creation as it opens with a repetition of part of the first line of the previous stanza, with Mademoiselle forming the borders of the puzzle. The speaker suggests that the pieces have their own artistic energy, as they are □align[ing] themselves□ into a scene of the earth or sky, taking over the act of creation. He describes the straight-edged pieces as naïve scientists, studying the origins of the

universe, □whose views clash.□ The others, □nomad inlanders,□ begin to arrange themselves into different shapes that in time become □sophisticated unit[s].□

Eventually, by suppertime, clear pictures have formed and come to life for Mademoiselle and the boy. In one cloud, they see a sheik with a □flashing sword hilt□ and, in the other, a □backward-looking slave or page-boy,□ whose feet are not yet complete, helping a woman off a camel. Mademoiselle mistakenly thinks the boy is the woman's son. The speaker finds some crucial pieces just before bedtime, which help □orient□ the images. He leaves the puzzle with a yellow section, which □promises□ to be a □sumptuous tent.□

The boy writes in his diary that he has begun the puzzle and peeks at Mademoiselle's letter to the priest, in which she has written □this innocent mother, this poor child, what will become of them?□ (□cette innocente mère / Ce pauvre enfant, que deviendront-ils?□), referring, most likely, to the boy and his mother. In another parenthetical digression, the speaker notes that when he was a boy, he did not try to find out more about Mademoiselle, who was French only by marriage. A friend later reveals that the speaker's own French has a German accent (□Tu as l'accent allemand□), taught by Mademoiselle, who was of English and Prussian ancestry. The speaker does not find this out until years later, however. He recognizes how Mademoiselle must have suffered, being caught between the German and French worlds just as World War II was breaking out. The speaker returns to the past as Mademoiselle says goodnight to the boy, telling him to □sleep well□ (□schlaf wohl□) in German and calling him □darling□ (□chéri□) in French. She kisses him and makes the sign of the cross, a Catholic blessing, on his forehead.

Stanzas 7-14

In these stanzas, the speaker focuses on the world of the puzzle as □it assembles on the shrinking Green.□ He describes the □noblest□ slaves (□avatars□) with their plumes, scars, and vests trimmed with fur (□vair□). In another scene in the picture, □old wives□ ease boredom with a narcotic made from hemp (□kef□) and sweet drinks, insisting that if Allah wills (□Insh'Allah□), their straying husbands will tire of their mistresses or kill them.

The speaker digresses for a moment, suggesting that this is hardly a subject for □the Home,□ and notes that the puzzle is a recreation of a painting allegedly done by a follower (□a minor lion□) of the French Orientalist artist Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904). He asks □dear Richard□ (most likely Richard Howard, to whom Merrill dedicated the poem) to investigate the true author.

In stanza 11, the speaker introduces Houri, one of the beautiful maidens living with the blessed in the Islamic paradise, and Afreet, an evil demon in Arabic mythology. In a play on the word *thieves*, he calls the two □thick as Thebes,□ referring to the ancient capital of Upper Egypt. Both try to claim the boy in the puzzle, who cannot decide □whom to serve□ and has not yet found his feet. The suggestion here is that the boy in the puzzle

represents the boy in the poem, who is torn between two divorcing parents. The speaker hopes the boy will find □that piece of Distance□ from this troubled situation, the □Eternal Triangle□: father, mother, child.

The puzzle is done, except for the sky; the blue pieces become fragments revolting against being placed into a pattern, not knowing how they will fit together. They have □quite a task□ arranging the pieces of □Heaven,□ but they eventually do. And then the puzzle is complete. The boy's missing feet have been found under the table, and the last pieces have been put into place.

Stanzas 15-18

With the puzzle complete, Mademoiselle returns to her work on the puppet shows, and □all too soon□ the puzzle is dismantled. When lifted, the puzzle stays together in some parts and separates in others. Each image in the puzzle eventually falls apart, including the tent, which appears as a creamy sauce (□mousseline□). Only the green top of the table, □on which the grown-ups gambled□ remains as the day ends. The speaker sees analogies, since he is a poet, between the green table and the □green dusk□□a false coincidence, since he can construct his own memory of the event. He also notes his □mangy tiger safe on his bared hearth,□ analogous to the tiger in the puzzle. These analogies, or similarities between unlike things, reinforce the boy's connection to the puzzle.

The speaker explains that before the puzzle was boxed and sent back to the shop on New York City's Upper East Side (the □mid-Sixties□), one piece □contrived,□ as if by its own intention, □to stay in the boy's pocket.□ Finding further analogies between the puzzle and life, the speaker admits that last puzzle pieces often went missing, like the high notes of Maggie Teyte, an English soprano (1888-1976) famous for her singing of French songs; the popularity of collies; a house; and bits of Mademoiselle's □truth.□

Back in the present, the speaker notes that he has spent the last few days searching in Athens for Rilke's translation of Valéry's □Palme.□ He notes the difficulty that Rilke had, or any translator has, in the process of translation: how much of the original he had to sacrifice in order to portray □its underlying sense□; how much the □warm Romance□ of the original □faded□; how the nouns were exaggerated and thus lonelier, cut off from the source. The German accent mark (□umlaut□), representative of Rilke's language, can only □peep□ and □hoot,□ since it is like an □owlet,□ without maturity, becoming an echo (□reverberation□) that nonetheless is □fill[ed] with stars.□

The speaker ends with a series of contradictions, asking whether the original is lost or buried, □one more missing piece.□ But then he insists that □nothing's lost□ or else all our experience with the world necessitates translation and that □every bit of us is lost in it. / (Or found-.□ In parenthesis, he reflects on the end of a relationship with a former lover (□S□), surprised at the resulting peacefulness. The final image is of the loss of that relationship, which becomes □a self-effacing tree,□ the context of a poem perhaps, □turn[ing] the waste,□ as does the tree, into □shade and fiber, milk and memory.□

Here the speaker reflects on the power of art to ease a sense of loss and □translate□ sorrow into comforting images of shade and sustenance. This last image ties to the loss experienced by the boy in the first stanza, when he suffers the absence of his parents and turns to the construction of a puzzle to provide him with comfort.

Themes

Artistic Creation

Merrill suggests that the poet □translates□ experience into the form and content of poetry. This process is not perfect, since the final work of art is never an exact translation of the original source material. He focuses much of □Lost in Translation□ on this complex process. The poem begins with two contrasting images: the library, a place of study, and the card table, a place of play for the boy and the adults who gamble on it. This juxtaposition suggests that the work of a poet, which the speaker often refers to as he thinks about Rilke's translation of Valéry, necessitates both study and play. The poet must study the works of other poets, their forms and content, as he plays with words to discover a new artistic creation that will more closely express the poet's experience.

When the speaker studies Valéry's □Palme,□ he focuses on □That sunlit paradigm whereby the tree / Taps a sweet wellspring of authority.□ The tree in the poem becomes a paradigm that he can use to express himself through his own poem. When he thinks of the tree in □Palme,□ a characterization of the slow growth of the palm tree, it triggers his memory of the time he waited for the puzzle to arrive and Mademoiselle tried to calm his □steaming bitterness□ with words of comfort: □Patience, chéri. Geduld, mein Schatz.□ The patient growth of the tree, □Patience dans l'azure,□ finds a correlation in Mademoiselle's words.

Many of the pieces of the puzzle, which becomes a metaphor for the boy's situation, □take / Shapes known already□the craftsman's repertoire.□ He finds one shaped like a palm, like the one in the poem that recalls Mademoiselle's comfort words. Yet the boy makes his own interpretation of the pictures in the puzzle, one that more closely correlates with his experience. He refuses ultimately, though, to identify himself with the boy in the puzzle when he insists that Mademoiselle is wrong when she decides that the page-boy is the woman's son, suggesting the difficulties inherent in artistic representation.

Power of Art

Merrill notes the power of art when the speaker's reading of □Palme□ triggers a childhood memory. He invests the puzzle with a similar power when the pieces appear to arrange themselves as Mademoiselle and the boy withdraw into the background. The pieces □align themselves with earth or sky□ and become □naïve cosmogonists / Whose views clash□ or □nomad inlanders□ who □Begin to cluster . . . /. . . on the straggler . . . / To form a more sophisticated unit.□ The figures in the picture come alive and gaze at each other across clouds.

The closing lines suggest the power of art to help us cope with loss. As the speaker thinks of a ruined past relationship, the loss becomes □a self-effacing tree,□ like the

palm in the poem and in the puzzle, turning □the waste□ into □shade and fiber, milk and memory.□

Style

The intricate five-part structure of the poem reinforces the link between the puzzle and the boy/poet. The first part, stanzas 1-3, focusing on the wait for the puzzle, is arranged in verse paragraphs that often contain iambic pentameter lines, ten-syllable lines with metrical units of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable. This section ends with the suggestion that all the parts of the poem come together to form an organic whole, much like the pieces of the puzzle: □The plot thickens / As all at once two pieces interlock.□

In the second section, stanza 4, Merrill shifts from blank verse (unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter) to a more poetic form, as the lines get shorter and more rhythmic. The time and place move to a scene in the future when the speaker witnessed a psychic's performance. The link between the first and second sections is established by having both scenes set in a library and through the puzzle piece that the psychic □sees□ hidden in the box.

The third section, stanzas 5 and 6, returns to the blank verse of the first section as the scene shifts back to the boy and Mademoiselle and to the picture in the puzzle emerging, along with certain details of Mademoiselle's background. The fourth section, stanzas 7-14, focuses on the completion of the puzzle, as it shifts to tightly controlled quatrains (stanzas of four lines each) until the final stanza, which breaks off into a closed couplet. A closed couplet is two lines of rhymed verse that comes to a strong conclusion, as here, where the two lines announce that the last piece has been found and the puzzle is complete. This section links to the subject of the final section, through the focus on artistic creation, after the puzzle is taken apart and shipped back to the shop. This fifth section, stanzas 15-18, returns to the initial verse paragraph form.

Historical Context

World War II

The world experienced a decade of aggression in the 1930s that would culminate in World War II. This war resulted from the rise of totalitarian regimes in Germany, Italy, and Japan. These militaristic regimes gained control as a result of the Great Depression experienced by most of the world in the early 1930s and from the conditions created by the peace settlements following World War I. The dictatorships established in each country encouraged expansion into neighboring countries. In Germany, Adolf Hitler strengthened the army during the 1930s. In 1936, Benito Mussolini's Italian troops overtook Ethiopia. From 1936 to 1939, Spain was engaged in civil war involving the fascist army of Francisco Franco, aided by Germany and Italy. In March 1938, Germany annexed Austria, and in March 1939, Germany occupied Czechoslovakia. Italy invaded Albania in April 1939.

One week after Nazi Germany and the USSR signed the Treaty of Nonaggression, on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, and World War II began. On September 3, 1939, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany after a U-boat sank the British ship *Athenia* off the coast of Ireland. Another British ship, *Courageous*, was sunk on September 19 that same year. All the members of the British Commonwealth, except Ireland, soon joined Britain and France in their declaration of war.

Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was a conflict fought in South Vietnam and the surrounding areas of Cambodia and Laos. Fighting on one side were the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese forces and an international coalition (including, among others, South Korea, Thailand, and Australia). The other side of the conflict was represented by North Vietnamese forces and a South Vietnamese guerrilla militia known as the Vietcong. The war started in 1954, soon after the provisions of the Geneva Conference divided Vietnam into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). Conflict initially broke out as a civil war between North Vietnam and South Vietnam but escalated as the United States threw its support to South Vietnam, initially by sending money and advisers and later by sending troops as well.

After the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed in August 1964, the United States increased its military aid to South Vietnam. By the end of the decade there were 550,000 American troops caught up in the conflict. North Vietnam gained armaments and technical support from the Soviet Union and other Communist countries. Despite massive bombing attacks, the United States and South Vietnam failed to push back the insurgency.

Progress was made with peace talks when President Lyndon B. Johnson decided not to seek reelection in 1968. After Richard Nixon was elected that year, he began troop withdrawals along with intensified bombing campaigns. In 1970, Nixon ordered the invasion of Communist strongholds in Cambodia.

Public opinion in the United States turned against the war as the number of casualties grew and reports of war crimes like the massacre of civilians at My Lai surfaced. Huge demonstrations took place in Washington, D.C., as well as in other cities and on college campuses. A peace agreement was finally reached in January 1973, but fighting between North Vietnam and South Vietnam did not abate. On April 30, 1975, South Vietnamese President Duong Van Minh surrendered to the Communists. Saigon fell as the last American troops left the country. More than 50,000 American soldiers died in the conflict, along with approximately 400,000 South Vietnamese and over 900,000 North Vietnamese.

Watergate

The Watergate affair refers to a series of scandals that eventually led to Richard Nixon's resignation of the presidency of the United States. It began with the burglarizing, on June 17, 1972, of the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee, located in the Watergate apartment complex in Washington, D.C. Police arrested five men who had attempted to break in to the party offices and plant wiretaps. Two of those involved in the break-in were employees of President Nixon's reelection committee.

One of the burglars, James McCord, sent a letter to the trial judge, John Sirica, claiming that a large-scale cover-up of the burglary was being conducted by the White House. His charges led to the ensuing political scandal. The media took an active role in covering the investigations. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, both reporters for the *Washington Post*, broke many significant details concerning the break-in and subsequent cover-up, aided by their mysterious informant, □Deep Throat.□

At a special Senate committee investigatory hearing of corrupt campaign practices, the former White House counsel John Dean testified that the former attorney general John Mitchell had approved the burglary and that two of the president's top aides had been involved in the cover-up. Special prosecutor Archibald Cox found through his investigations of the affair that the Nixon reelection committee had conducted widespread political espionage that included illegal wiretapping of American citizens.

Cox sued Nixon in order to get him to hand over tapes of his presidential conversations during the early 1970s. Nixon initially refused, but he was eventually forced to give them up. One of the tapes contained a significant gap, allegedly caused by Nixon's secretary. Another, however, contained conversations in which Nixon admitted that he had participated in the Watergate cover-up from the outset. This tape became known as the □smoking gun□ tape.

By 1974, the majority of Americans believed that Nixon was involved in the cover-up, and confidence in his administration steadily eroded. The public began to call for Nixon to resign. On July 30, 1974, the House Judiciary Committee adopted three articles of impeachment against Nixon for obstruction of justice. Nixon later admitted that he had tried to halt the FBI's investigation into the break-in. At 9 p.m. on August 8, 1974, Richard Nixon appeared on national television and resigned the office of the presidency. The next morning, Nixon resigned formally; transferred the office to Gerald Ford, who became the new president; and left the White House.

By the end of the 1970s, Americans appeared to adopt a pervasive attitude of pessimism. The Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal had shaken their belief in government, and a distrust of human nature had grown after the assassinations of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Critical Overview

In an article for the *New York Times Book Review* on *Scripts for the Pageant*, Denis Donoghue determines that Merrill's □common style is a net of loose talk tightening to verse, a mode in which nearly anything can be said with grace.□ He finds a strong connection between W. H. Auden and Merrill, an association other scholars have noted as well, especially in his *Divine Comedies*.

Louis Simpson writes in his review of that collection, also in the *New York Times Book Review*: □Auden would have liked all this very much□he had small patience with simplicity, whether natural or assumed.□ Simpson likens the poems in *Divine Comedies* to □a kaleidoscope□a brightly colored pattern or scene twitching into another pattern.□ Deeming Merrill's writing □ingenious□ and □witty,□ Simpson finds that □a society of cultivated readers might give [the poems] a high place□ but acknowledges that Merrill would be too obscure for most. Still, he writes, □it is hardly the poet's fault that there are few readers of this kind of poetry.□

Harold Bloom, in his review for the *New Republic*, claims, □James Merrill . . . has convinced many discerning readers of a greatness, or something like it, in his first six volumes of verse, but until this year I remained a stubborn holdout.□ Bloom insists that *Divine Comedies* □converts□ him, □absolutely if belatedly, to Merrill. . . . The book's eight shorter poems surpass nearly all the earlier Merrill.□

One of the eight shorter poems in the collection is the celebrated □Lost in Translation.□ The poem was apparently also important to Merrill, who moved it to the final position in *From the First Nine, 1946-1976*, the reissued edition of his first nine volumes of poetry. As any poet knows, the words at the end of a line or a poem, or in this case a book, are placed there for special emphasis.

Echoing many a scholar's view of the poem's theme, Robert B. Shaw, in his article in the *New York Times Book Review*, states that Merrill □makes his most profound impression on the reader . . . as a connoisseur of loneliness: the loneliness of a child grown up and still in search of his absent parents.□ Willard Spiegelman, in his article on Merrill for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, calls the poem □impressive□ and argues that it □pinpoints, more succinctly than any of Merrill's other short poems, the issues of loss and possession.□ He cites a quote from Robert Frost, who claimed that poetry □is what is lost in translation,□ and concludes, □Merrill's poem proves the adage wrong, since loss through translation is the motive for the poem itself.□

Donoghue writes that Merrill □has always been sensitive to 'the golden things that go without saying,' and the things, equally golden, that have gone without saying until he has said them.□ It is this poetic craftsmanship that has prompted others, like R. W. Flint in his article for the *New York Times Book Review*, to conclude that Merrill □has long since taken his place as one of the most accomplished satirists, wits and lyricists of the age.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In the following essay, Perkins examines the exploration of the problematic process of gaining knowledge in Merrill's poem.

Prior to the twentieth century, authors structured their works to reflect their belief in the stability of character and the intelligibility of experience. Traditionally, literary works ended with a clear sense of closure, as conflicts were resolved and characters gained knowledge about themselves and their world. Poetic images coalesced into an organic whole that expressed the poet's view of the coherence of experience. Many writers during the twentieth century challenged these assumptions as they expanded literature's traditional form to accommodate their characters' and their own questions about the indeterminate nature of knowing in the modern age□a major thematic concern for these writers. The critic Allan Rodway, in an article on the problem of knowledge in Tom Stoppard's plays, explains this focus as a question: □How do we know we really *know* what we think we know?□ James Merrill continues this inquiry in □Lost in Translation□ as he examines the tentative nature of communication and its relationship to the difficulties inherent in the process of gaining absolute knowledge.

In an article in the *New York Times Book Review*, later reprinted as □Acoustical Chambers□ in *Recitative: Prose*, Merrill discusses the autobiographical nature of □Lost in Translation□ and the inability of words to convey truth. He notes that he had a governess named □Mademoiselle,□ who was neither French□which she had led him to believe□nor an unmarried woman (she was a widow). He remembers, □By the time I was eight I had learned from her enough French and German to understand that English was merely one of many ways to express things.□ He also discovered the difficulties of translation, since □the everyday sounds of English could mislead you by having more than one meaning.□ After thinking about how specific words could have alternate meanings in different contexts, he concludes, □Words weren't what they seemed. The mother tongue could inspire both fascination and distrust.□

In □Lost in Translation,□ Merrill uses a puzzle as a metaphor for the problematic nature of acquiring knowledge, a process that depends on the arrangement of words and memory into a coherent pattern. He does this through the fragmented form of the poem, which shifts back and forth in time, and through its language, which juxtaposes contrasting images in four languages.

The poem's main focus is on the speaker, who, through memory, tries to piece together a concrete image of himself as a boy. This task, however, becomes impossible, owing to the fact that the poem contains so many gaps, as David Perkins notes in □The Achievement of James Merrill.□ Perkins writes that, when the speaker tries to interpret his experience, □too many interpretations come to mind□ as he □moons and pores over events, memories, images, words, detecting always more possible meanings.□

The speaker tries to focus on one main event in his past: a time when he and his French nanny put together an intricate puzzle sent by his absent parents. What the boy sees in the puzzle appears to express the problems he is experiencing at home. A male and a female figure in the puzzle become combatants, waging a battle over who will win a page-boy. The boy in the puzzle looks backward, much like the speaker who digs into the past to try to gain a true sense of self.

Perkins concludes that the scene depicted in the puzzle represents □family tensions at a time when [Merrill's] father was taking a new wife. The past□that summer, his parents, and what was going on between them□is similarly a puzzle . . . and solving it is impossible.□ The boy cannot understand why his parents are not with him: □a summer without parents is the puzzle.□ The piece that will provide the answer is missing, as is the last puzzle piece. Appropriately, the missing pieces are the boy's feet, which would □ground□ him in the puzzle. The boy similarly lacks grounding without the knowledge of his place in his newly disrupted family.

Although the pieces that make the puzzle complete are eventually found, the puzzle must be dismantled and put away □all too soon.□ In this process, each image eventually falls apart. The boy holds on to one piece, which means that the puzzle will never again be complete. The speaker admits that last puzzle pieces often go missing, like bits of Mademoiselle's □truth.□ As he struggles to find all the missing pieces that will identify his place in his shifting familial triangle, the boy also, unknowingly, has been denied information about Mademoiselle's identity, since she has withheld facts about herself in an effort to hide her Prussian ancestry, a dangerous secret during the war years.

The poem suggests that memory is unreliable and therefore cannot provide absolute knowledge of the past. Perkins concludes that □to recall the past is inevitably to transform it creatively, as the painting both reflected and transformed the family crisis, or as Merrill does in writing the poem.□ Merrill employs metaphors of creation in his focus on the speaker's attempts to understand his past. The dominant metaphor is of translation, which Perkins notes is □a process in which the original is both reconstituted and lost.□

The speaker reveals that he is actively constructing his memory of his past in an attempt to understand it, when he compares images in the puzzle to objects in his home. He notes □the false eyes of (coincidence)□ in his □mangy tiger safe on his bared hearth,□ similar to the boy's translating a □vibrant egg-yolk yellow□ into a □pelt of what emerging animal / . . . To form a more sophisticated unit□ in the puzzle.

The speaker attempts to translate Rilke's translation of Valéry's poem □Palme,□ as the boy tries to □translate□ the images of the puzzle, suggesting that gaining complete understanding of each is impossible. The boy sees a sheik in one cloud (which is how he describes the pieces of the puzzle already fitted together) and a □dark-eyed woman veiled in mauve□ in another. The two gaze at each other □with marked if undecipherable feeling.□ These two figures become Houri, one of the beautiful maidens living with the blessed in the Islamic paradise, and Afreet, an evil demon in Arabic

mythology, who fight over the page-boy, in an analogous situation to that of the boy. Mademoiselle determines that the boy is the woman's son, but the speaker insists that she is mistaken. Of course, Mademoiselle's reliability is in question after the speaker discovers the truths she has hidden about herself. The speaker points out the difficulties in translation here. If he is not the boy in the puzzle, then who is he and how will he come to understand his experience?

Evans Lansing Smith, in his article on the poem for *Explicator*, concludes that Mademoiselle's □genealogical puzzle implicates the historical and linguistic complexities of the modern world, because she speaks English, French, and German in the poem, sometimes simultaneously.□ She often uses different languages in the same sentence (□Schlaf wohl, chéri□ and □Patience, chéri. Geduld, mein Schatz□). These three languages, as well as Arabic, are used in the poem, suggesting the inexactness of language. The speaker notes the difficulties of finding exact translations when he questions his German equivalent to □patience dans l'azure□ (□Geduld im . . . Himmelblau?□).

Merrill reinforces this view through his word choice in the poem. Perkins concludes that □his syntax extends horizontally, packing thought within thought. . . . He spreads metaphors like nets to see what they will catch.□ Merrill inserts clever juxtapositions that, in effect, construct and deconstruct reality and knowledge. For example, he includes oxymorons, that is, contradictory or seemingly incompatible words, in the phrases □keeps never coming,□ □Full of unfulfillment,□ and □Sour windfalls.□ In other lines he juxtaposes daylight with lamplight and □arisen□ with □fallen,□ creating □a see-saw□ of language and so of reality. Merrill ends the poem with a series of contradictions that reinforce the problematic nature of translation and of understanding, suggesting that □nothing's lost□ and then □all is translation / And every bit of us is lost in it / (Or found.□

Daniel Mendelsohn, in his review of *Collected Poems*, concludes that in his poetry, Merrill flips □the world upside down for you, making you wonder about that stuff you thought was 'air'□and . . . about just where you stand in relation to everything and anything.□ The questions Merrill raises in □Lost in Translation□ force us to recognize our inexact knowledge of ourselves and our world.

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

Adaptations

Random House Audio has published an audiocassette of Merrill's poetry, read by the author, as part of □The Voice of the Poet□ series (1999).

Topics for Further Study

Read some representative poetry by W. H. Auden and compare themes and structures used in his poetry with those of □Lost in Translation.□ Three poems you might want to look at are □Musée des Beaux Arts,□ □Stop All the Clocks. . .□(□Twelve Songs: IX,□ sometimes called □Funeral Blues□), and □The Unknown Citizen.□

Some scholars find elements of the confessional, an autobiographical verse form, in Merrill's poetry. Research this school of poetry and Merrill's life and determine whether there is any evidence for this claim.

Research the effects of divorce on children. What effects do you see on the boy in the poem?

Many poets have focused on childhood memories in their poetry, including □Piano□ by D. H. Lawrence, □My Papa's Waltz,□ by Theodore Roethke, and □Those Winter Sundays□ by Robert Hayden. In each of these poems, as in □Lost in Translation,□ the speaker describes a childhood memory that involves a parent. After reading these selections, write your own poem that focuses on a particular memory that you have of an experience with one or both of your parents.

Compare and Contrast

Early 1970s: After fighting a brutal and unpopular war in Vietnam, the United States pulls out its troops. Soon after, Saigon falls to the Communists.

Today: The United States is involved in another unpopular war, this time in Iraq. Even though elections have taken place, many believe that civil war will break out in that country.

Early 1970s: Communist insurgents refuse to recognize elections in South Vietnam and continue fighting against the South Vietnamese and American troops.

Today: Insurgents in Iraq, made up of Iraqi civilians and terrorist groups, carry out similar attacks against occupational forces.

Early 1970s: The Watergate scandal exposes corrupt campaign practices, including break-ins at the Democratic National Committee headquarters and illegal wiretaps of American citizens.

Today: Scandals emerge during the 2004 presidential election concerning smear campaigns like that conducted by the □Swift Boat Veterans□ and alleged illegal voting procedures.

What Do I Read Next?

Several scholars see similarities between Merrill and W. H. Auden. Look at some of Auden's poems in *Collected Poems* (1991).

Divine Comedies (1976) also contains *The Book of Ephraim*, another of Merrill's celebrated poems.

Merrill's epic poem *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982) has themes similar to those of □Lost in Translation.□

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).

Further Study

Blasing, Mutlu Konuk, "Rethinking Models of Literary Change: The Case of James Merrill," in *American Literary History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Summer 1990, pp. 299-317.

Blasing explores a postmodernist emphasis in Merrill's work.

Buckley, C. A., "Quantum Physics and the Ouija-Board: James Merrill's Holistic World View," in *Mosaic*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Spring 1993, pp. 39-61.

Buckley focuses on Merrill's interplay of science and poetry.

Vendler, Helen Hennessey, "James Merrill," in *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets*, Harvard University Press, 1980, pp. 205-32.

Vendler includes a comprehensive explication of the *Divine Comedies*.

White, Edmund, "On James Merrill," in *The Burning Library: Essays*, edited by David Bergman, Knopf, 1994, pp. 43-55.

White focuses on Merrill's "ambitious" *The Book of Ephraim*.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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