Mastectomy Study Guide

Mastectomy by Alicia Ostriker

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

In the mid 1990s, Alicia Ostriker was diagnosed with breast cancer. She expressed her feelings about this traumatic experience, which resulted in a mastectomy and a long, painful recovery, in her collection of poems, *The Crack in Everything*. When it was published in 1996, the book confirmed her reputation as one of America's finest poets. The fourth section of the collection, titled "The Mastectomy Poems," deals directly with her response to each stage of her cancer: the diagnosis, the surgery and treatment, and the aftermath. In one of the most powerful poems of this sequence, "Mastectomy," the speaker describes her interaction with the doctor who performed the surgery and imagines how he removed her breast. The poem becomes a poignant exploration of one woman's struggle to understand and cope with the physical and emotional consequences of this disease.

Author Biography

Alicia Ostriker was born on November 11, 1937, in New York City, to David, a civil service employee, and Beatrice Suskin, both of whom had earned bachelor degrees in English. Ostriker grew up in a housing project in New York City where her mother read Shakespeare and Browning, among others, which inspired a love of literature in her and prompted her to write her own poetry. Ostriker earned a B.A. from Brandeis University in 1959 and an M.A. (1961) and a Ph.D. (1964) from the University of Wisconsin. A year later, she began teaching at Rutgers University.

Ostriker's first book of poems, *Songs*, was published in 1969. By the time her collections *The Mother/Child Papers* (1980) and *A Woman under the Surface* (1982) appeared, her reputation as an important American poet had been established. In 1986, her controversial treatise on literary feminism, *Stealing the Language*, was published. After that, she continued to write poetry, dealing with personal as well as spiritual topics and essays on gender and literature.

Ostriker's work has been published in various periodicals, including the *American Poetry Review*, *New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Paris Review*, *Nation*, *Poetry*, and the *New York Times Book Review*. Her poems and essays have also been published in anthologies, including *Our Mothers, Our Selves: Writers and Poets Celebrating Motherhood* (1996); *Worlds in Our Words: Contemporary American Women Writers* (1997); *Best American Poetry* and *Yearbook of American Poetry* (both in 1996). Her poems have been translated into French, Italian, German, Japanese, Hebrew, and Arabic.

Ostriker has received numerous honors and awards. Some of these are a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1976–1977), the Pushcart Prize (1979, 2000); a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship (1982); a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship (1984–1985); and the William Carlos Williams Prize in 1986 for *The Imaginary Lover*. She was named a National Book Award finalist, received the Paterson Poetry Award, and the San Francisco State Poetry Center Award, all in 1996, for *The Crack in Everything*, which contains the poem "Mastectomy."

In 1958, she married Jeremiah P. Ostriker, a professor of astrophysics, with whom she had two children. As of 2007, she was teaching English and creative writing at Rutgers University.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

“Mastectomy” begins with the speaker addressing the doctor directly, explaining her feelings about the operation. Then it jumps back and forth in time from before to during the operation. She begins with a description of their interaction before the surgery when she shook his hand, appreciating his confident manner. She compares him to a ship captain and his view of her as a map of the bay with no reefs (underwater ridges of coral or rock) or shoals. A shoal, here used as a noun, has several definitions: a group of fish swimming together, a group of people or things, or an underwater sandbank that is visible at low tide in shallow water. Here, it most likely suggests a sandbank since that, coupled with the reef, connotes a barrier.

While the speaker appears to have confidence in the doctor, she suggests that he is young or looks it with his “boyish freckles.” She then begins her description of the surgery as she notes that she lost consciousness under the anesthesia. When she describes how the drug sent her “away, like the unemployed,” she notes her powerlessness. She feels like she is underwater while unconscious, like she “swam and supped with the fish.” The speaker assumes that while she was under, the doctor performed the operation carefully; she learns later the operation took about an hour.

Stanza 2

The speaker shifts back in time at the beginning of this stanza to her first office visit with the doctor when she learned that she had cancer. She again refers to the doctor’s “freckled face,” which she liked at that first meeting, along with his honesty when she asked him about the odds that the biopsy would prove that she had cancer. He immediately told her, without mincing words, that she had a one-out-of-four chance of having the disease. She imagines that his diploma hanging on his wall “shrugged” at his estimate of her chances, probably because she did have cancer even though her odds were good. At the end of the stanza, she notes his experience: he has seen “everything” from his “cold window onto Amsterdam,” all of the “bums and operas,” and that filled her with enough confidence in him to choose him to perform her surgery.

Stanza 3

In this stanza the speaker uses a series of images to describe her body as the doctor performs the operation. She asks the doctor whether her flesh was “succulent” and “juicy” like the fruit she later names. The image of flesh as grass is rather obscure here. Grass is a living thing like flesh unless it becomes detached, and it also serves as a groundcover. One could compare that to how flesh covers the body’s organs. Anesthetized, the speaker dreams about her flesh not as grass but as ripe fruit while the

doctor makes his incisions. First, she imagines her flesh as candied fruit that the doctor "displays," then as green honeydew and then "like a pomegranate full of seeds."

This last metaphor she extends to the mythological figure of Persephone, the goddess of the underworld and daughter to the Greek god Zeus and the mortal woman, Demeter. Dazzled by her beauty, Hades abducted Persephone and pulled her down into the underworld. When Zeus intervened, Hades agreed to release her after giving her a pomegranate. When Persephone ate some of its seeds, a spell was cast over her, which forced her to return to Hades four months out of each year. Ostriker refers to Persephone's pomegranate seeds as "electric dots / That kept that girl in hell" and "made her queen of death." Here, the speaker correlates the image of the seeds to the cancer cells in her body.

She then shifts her focus to the doctor cutting out the cells in her flesh, which she likens to a watermelon. She describes him as serious about his work as he operates, trying to "[eliminate] the odds" that cancer exists in the breast and surrounding tissue cells and may kill her if these parts are left in her body. The poem ends on an uncertain note. She is not sure that the excised cells would have developed into cancer if left in her body.

Themes

Identity

As the speaker in the poem tries to comprehend her experience with breast surgery, she must deal with the physical and emotional changes that occur as a patient confronts and undergoes mastectomy. Before and during the early part of the surgery, she sees herself in traditional feminine images. She imagines her breast as “succulent” and “juicy” like ripe fruit, suggesting that before the operation she felt womanly and fertile. As the surgeon removes her breast, the fruit metaphors shift to verbs associated with incision, chopping, and serving, as though the fruit associated with sexual attraction is now just a lump of matter to be handled with a knife and cleaned. This transition suggests that the speaker’s self-image is undergoing a transformation, too. The poem concludes in an open-ended way, without the speaker having found a new identity. The poem ends with a question about whether, had she not had the surgery, cancer would have developed in the excised parts. Here Ostriker suggests that establishing a new sense of self after such a traumatic procedure is difficult and takes time beyond the surgery.

Innocence and Death

Ostriker’s allusion to the myth of the Greek goddess Persephone ties into her themes in the poem of innocence and death. Persephone was abducted by Hades and brought to the underworld. The pomegranate seeds that she was forced to eat become a symbol of the speaker’s cancer cells. Like Persephone, she was an innocent who should have beaten the one-in-four odds that she had cancer. In that sense she was “abducted” by fate. Her discovery of the cancer threatens to make her the “queen of death” as well. The two are also linked by the image of barrenness. During the months that Persephone was forced to remain in the underworld, winter occurs. The speaker alludes to her own barrenness when the symbol of her fertility, her breast, is removed, and she no longer uses fruit metaphors to describe her flesh. Ostriker’s use of the myth of Persephone connects the speaker’s plight with a universal pattern of birth and death and the seasons of the year. Moreover, the ratio stated, one in four, suggests that winter or death is correlated with cancer, while the three remaining are correlated to the other three seasons of the year, spring, summer, and fall, times of sowing, growing, and reaping.

Style

Free Verse, also referred to as open form, does not contain set patterns of meter, rhyme, and stanza. Rhythm emerges from the repetition of words or phrases or in line breaks. Ostriker's use of free verse in the poem gives readers a sense that the speaker's observations are spontaneous, that she is thinking out loud about her experiences. This sense is heightened by her use of simple declarative sentences, such as the opening lines: "I shook your hand before I went. / Your nod was brief, your manner confident."

Rhythm is achieved in a variety of ways but does not follow any set pattern. The first two lines form a couplet ending with the words "went" and "confident" as do those in the first two lines of the third stanza, "juicy" and "me" but that end-line rhyming pattern appears no where else in the poem. Also, Ostriker undercuts the standard form of the couplet in the second line of the third stanza when she does not end a thought with the rhymed word. After the word "me," the thought continues on the next line: "In pleated paper like a candied fruit." Ostriker also uses repetition to establish rhythm. In the second stanza, for example, she repeats the image of the freckled face of the doctor, and in the second stanza, she twice uses the verb, to mince. She uses a partial repetition when in the third stanza she notes that the doctor "spooned" her flesh away "nipple and all," and in the next line, she insists that he "nipped out / Those almost insignificant cells." The final instance occurs in the third stanza when the speaker is describing how the doctor "scooped" the cancer from her "ducts." Ostriker's refusal to follow traditional poetic patterns seems in keeping with the personal nature of her speaker's experience with this operation.

Historical Context

Breast Cancer

The most common, worldwide form of cancer in women is breast cancer, which in the early 2000s constitutes about 7.3 percent of all cancers. One estimate is that between one in every nine to thirteen women who live in Western countries to the age of ninety is diagnosed with this form of cancer, which is the second most fatal for women after lung cancer. The chances of getting breast cancer increase with age, but younger women who develop it often do so in more aggressive forms. Less than 1 percent of the total number of cases occurs in men.

Damage to DNA is thought to be the leading cause of the cancer, indicating a strong inherited risk, but a direct cause for most incidences is unknown. Some studies have shown environmental influences, such as diet and alcohol consumption, to be factors. Other risk factors include a high density of breast tissue, the onset of menstruation at twelve years or younger, menopause that occurs at fifty-five or older, first pregnancy at thirty or older or no pregnancies, and long-term use of oral contraceptives and hormone replacement therapy.

Breast cancer in the early stages is difficult to detect since it has no symptoms. It is usually discovered through a mammography or the detection of a lump in the breast, under the arm, or above the collarbone. Other symptoms include nipple inversion or discharge and skin changes in the breast. Regular self-examinations of the breast and mammography are highly recommended for the detection of breast cancers, especially for women over fifty.

Mastectomy

The most common treatment of breast cancer when it is localized is the removal of the tumor, called a lumpectomy, which is usually followed by hormonal, chemo-, or radiation therapy. When the cancer is found in surrounding tissue, the surgeon may perform a mastectomy, the surgical removal of the breast. Traditionally, the entire breast was removed when cancer was discovered, but in the late 1990s and early 2000s, more options were considered after diagnosis. Sometimes women who have a high incidence of breast cancer in the family decide to undergo a mastectomy as a preventative measure.

Different types of mastectomy include simple (all breast tissue is removed but surrounding lymph nodes and pectoral tissue beneath the breast are left in tact), modified radical (breast tissue and some lymph nodes are removed), and radical (breast tissue, nodes, and pectoral tissue are removed). Some operations preserve the skin of the breast so that reconstructive surgery can be performed.

Radical mastectomies were the most popular form of breast surgery before the 1980s when the modified radical took its place. By the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, more concern was shown for breast conservation. As a result, lumpectomies, node dissections, and radiation became more frequently the chosen treatments.

Critical Overview

Reviews for *The Crack in Everything* were overwhelmingly positive, and several critics singled out the “Mastectomy Poems” for special notice. Doris Earnshaw in her review of the collection for *World Literature Today* finds the tone of the poems “sober and honest” with a “warmth at heart” and insists that “Ostriker puts no barriers of arcane language between herself and her reader.” Earnshaw also praises her “acute observation” in the poems. Marilyn Hacker, in her article “Tectonic Shifts,” calls Ostriker “an important American poet” and suggests that the collection affirms “the poet’s unique and contradictory role, at once storyteller and witness, s/he who makes of language not a prison but a prism, refracting and re-combining the spectrum of human possibilities.”

In her review for *American Book Review*, Sharon Dolin describes the collection as “a mature work filled with wisdom about personal grief and the world,” written by a poet with “enormous range.” Dolin praises the poems’ “study in compassion for the self and others” and their focus on “what we can and cannot master, and to what we can at least bear witness.” Patricia Monaghan, in *Booklist*, finds that the “distinguished” Ostriker “writes with calm authority and almost rocklike solidity,” proving herself to be “a poet singing at the top of her form.” She also points out how immediate and private the poems can feel as one reads them: “although hers is a public voice of great clarity, her poems also possess a quality of being overheard, and reading them can seem like finding an especially lyrical journal or chancing upon a great opera singer practicing in the shower.” Putting the same sentiment a different way, a reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* insists that Ostriker’s “accomplished poems . . . are grounded in the details of a woman’s daily life and speak with the appeal of an intelligent, sympathetic friend.” This reviewer concludes, “Ostriker confronts middle age and mortality with deft touch and wry humor.”

Alison Townsend in *Women’s Review of Books* claims that Ostriker “writes about something terrible, transforming it with the intelligence and beauty of her art” and “from a level of awareness that is both heartbreaking and healing, precisely because it encompasses so much loss.” She finds that “one of Ostriker’s greatest strengths as poet has always been the lack of separation between self and world in her work,” which is “immediate, passionate and direct” with “an intimacy that startles the reader.” Though her poetry is “often tender,” Townsend claims that Ostriker “is overall witty and urbane, a poet of intellect whose voice is filtered through an acute social consciousness.” Her poems “all speak with authenticity and authority . . . helping us to approach our own terrible stories in the process.”

Townsend reserves special praise for “The Mastectomy Poems,” which, she insists, are “strong, touch-minded, lyrical poems” that describe “the experience of mastectomy . . . with clarity and grace.” Her poetry “offers us a different perspective on loss, damage or fear and its transformation through the ritual of poem-making.” A reviewer in *Virginia Quarterly Review* claims that “The Mastectomy Poems” are “simply stunning,” while Steven R. Ellis in the *Library Journal* finds that they “convey the experience of

mastectomy in a frank and liberating clarity but always with the riddle of an illness underneath."

The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer argues that Ostriker's observations in these poems "cut as clean and sharp as the surgeon's scalpel" as her readers "become immersed in her sensibility that 'tragedy / Is a sort of surrender." Monaghan finds the "Mastectomy Poems" are "moving" in their focus on "the push-pull of public and private voices." "In this sequence," she writes, "Ostriker's impressive craft rises to meet a demanding subject so fully that these poems stand among the classics of the poem-sequence genre."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of twentieth-century American and English literature and film. In this essay, she explores Ostriker's focus on the transforming power of poetry.

The title of Alicia Ostriker's collection of poems *The Crack in Everything* alludes to an interpretation found in the writings of the Kabbala, a mystical Jewish doctrine that includes stories of the creation of the world. One such story focuses on the cracking of the vessel, representing the world, into which the first light was poured. Humans were directed by God to repair the brokenness of the world. The title also refers to a line from a song by Leonard Cohen, which Ostriker uses for the collection's epigraph: "There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in." Both of these allusions relate to the theme of the poems in the collection, including "Mastectomy," in which Ostriker explores how poetic language can express the experience of a woman whose world has "cracked" after she is diagnosed with breast cancer.

Ostriker gives a perfect example of this instruction in 'Mastectomy' as she gathers the pain into a poetic language of cancer, breaking the silence caused by the fear of imagining what it is like to lose a breast.

The twelve mastectomy poems that appear at the end of the collection chronicle the stages a woman who has breast cancer experiences. In "Mastectomy," she confers with her doctor whom she has chosen to perform the operation and then describes what she imagines happened during the surgery. The cancer has created a significant crack in her world which she needs to repair. Yet ironically, as Cohen's song suggests, that very crack allows light in. Here the light becomes the poetic process of putting experience into words that express the emotional pain the speaker endures as she struggles to understand what is happening to her.

In "Class," another poem in the collection, Ostriker insists, "The teacher's job is to give [her students] permission / To gather pain into language." She tells them to "*Write for the sake of the silenced. / Write what makes you afraid to write*." Ostriker gives a perfect example of this instruction in "Mastectomy" as she gathers the pain into a poetic language of cancer, breaking the silence caused by the fear of imagining what it is like to lose a breast.

Ostriker juxtaposes direct, declarative statements with detailed metaphors as she finds the language to express the reality of the speaker's experience. The speaker's keen, straightforward observations create a personal, almost conversational tone, as if she is thinking out loud. She does this when she describes the doctor, to whom she addresses her observations about him and about her surgery. Here Ostriker's free verse adds to the effect of individualizing the speaker's experience as her lines sound more like prose than poetry: "I assume you were careful. / They say it took an hour or so."

The speaker's direct tone as she details the doctor's characteristics reveals the confidence she has in him. He appears capable yet youthful with "boyish freckles." He is honest when the speaker asks about her odds, not "mincing words," which is why she chose him to "cut" her. He flushes during the operation, "serious / About [his] line of work." She adds a note of irony, however, when she imagines his medical diploma "shrugg[ing] slightly" when he tells her that her odds of her getting cancer are only one out of four, a direct response to a complex question. She soon learns that even a capable, experienced doctor, who has "seen everything" from his "cold window onto Amsterdam," can get the odds wrong.

Ostriker moves from direct to metaphoric language whenever she describes the speaker's cancer or the surgery she endures. Through the use of a series of metaphors, the speaker tries to find the right images to understand and express her experience. Her initial use of figurative language occurs in the first stanza when she describes herself lying on the operating table. Here the doctor becomes "a ship's captain" while she is a chart of the bay unfurled before him. Her confidence in him is reflected by her determination that there are no "reefs, no shoals" on the chart—no impediments to his successful navigation.

She extends the maritime metaphor a few lines later when she describes the effect that the anesthesia has on her. She feels as if she is underwater, swimming and eating with the fish, a rather peaceful and benign image. That tone, however, is modulated by her likening herself to the unemployed after "the drug sent [her] away." Here she suggests the powerlessness she feels regarding her body and what is happening to it. She can neither prevent the cancer from spreading, nor can she ensure that the doctor will perform the operation successfully, which she notes when she admits that she can only "assume" that he was careful.

In the third stanza, Ostriker begins a series of fruit metaphors that are used to characterize the way the speaker feels about her breast as it is being removed. This series is linked to the previous stanza when she uses the word "minces" to describe what the surgeon does in the operating room. In the operating room, he becomes a dark chef, as he "display[s]" the speaker's flesh "in pleated paper like a candied fruit." She knows that flesh is nondescript as "grass," little more than a covering for the important bodily organs, yet dreams about her own as ripe fruit. She wonders whether her flesh was "succulent" and "juicy" as "green honeydew," "a pomegranate full of seeds, or a watermelon" when he made his incision.

She extends the image of the pomegranate full of seeds to the Greek goddess Persephone, who, after eating some of the seeds from that fruit given to her by Hades, was forced to return to the underworld for a few months every year. "Those electric dots . . . kept that girl in hell" where, for those few months, she became "queen of death." The speaker imagines the seeds of Persephone's pomegranate as the cancer cells in her own breast, "jelly pips" that could also keep her in hell and make her the queen of death if they spread throughout her body.

The ripe fruit images suggest the speaker's feelings of fecundity and femininity, values associated with breasts. After the doctor is done knifing, chopping, and dividing her flesh, the fruit images, along with her sense of herself as a woman, disappear. At the end of the operation, he "scooped" up the ducts and the blubber, "spooned it off and away, nipple and all" in order to "[eliminate] the odds" that she will die.

The poem ends on an ambiguous note. The speaker does not know whether the cells that the doctor has removed along with her breast were "insignificant" or not. She acknowledges that they "might / Or might not have lain dormant forever," and thus she comes to an acceptance of her mortality and the part that luck plays in it, for this is an answer that she will never find. She is left with the experience of losing her breast, which she has tried, as part of the grieving process, to put into words in order to understand. In this sense, then, through the transforming power of poetry, while she may not be able to repair the crack in her world, she has been able to let some light through it.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "Mastectomy," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• Read some of the other “Mastectomy Poems” in *The Crack in Everything* that focus on different stages in Ostriker’s experience with the surgery, such as “The Bridge” (which chronicles her pre-op experience) and “Normal” (which depicts her struggle to adapt to the loss of a breast). Compare these other poems to “Mastectomy” in an essay, focusing on what Ostriker says about the different stages that women go through when they must deal with breast cancer and a mastectomy.

• Write a poem or short story about the speaker’s life and attitude toward the surgery and her body ten years after the operation.

• Interview women who have undergone a mastectomy and present a PowerPoint presentation on your findings about their experiences and views of the treatment they received.

• Research the causes and treatment of breast cancer and give a presentation to your class on your findings.

What Do I Read Next?

- Ostriker wrote twelve poems in *The Crack in Everything* (1996) that center on her experience with undergoing a mastectomy. The speaker in these poems focuses on her responses to the diagnosis, the surgery, and the aftermath as she tries to adjust to her new body. One especially poignant poem is “Normal,” which focuses on others’ as well as her own response to the operation.

- Ostriker’s controversial treatise on literary feminism, *Stealing the Language*, was published in 1986. This work proposes that only women can have an authentic voice when constructing female literary characters.

- *The Cancer Journals* (1980), by Audre Lorde, is a courageous chronicle of Lorde’s struggle with breast cancer and radical mastectomy and the support she received from her community of women. Lorde was one of the first to speak out about the harsh reality of the surgery and its aftermath.

- *How Cancer Works* (2003), by Lauren Sompayrac, defines the ten most common cancers and explains causes and treatments.

Further Study

Benedet, Rosalind, and Bob Hogenmiller, *After Mastectomy: Healing Physically and Emotionally*, Addicus Books, 2003.

Benedet, an experienced oncology nurse who has helped hundreds of women recover from mastectomies, offers important guides to emotional and physical recovery, including reconstruction options. Hogenmiller provides detailed photographs of the surgery and of the healing process.

Lucas, Geralyn, *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy*, St. Martin's Press, 2004.

The twenty-seven-year-old author, producer of the television show *20/20*, chronicles her bout with breast cancer, including her emotional response and coping strategies pre- and post-surgery.

Perkins, David, *A History of Modern Poetry*, Vol. 2: *Modernism and After*, Belknap Press, 2004.

Perkins examines the works of individual poets published up to the twenty-first century as well as important movements such as modernism, beat poetry, and confessional poetry. He notes the distinctiveness and the interconnectedness among the poets in these movements and addresses the critical response to them over the years.

Spiegelman, William, *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Poetry*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Spiegelman investigates how poetry makes connections between the word and the image and offers insight into the processes of reading and interpretation. He also explores how word and image are influenced by biographical and cultural factors.

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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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