Memory Study Guide

Memory by Sarah Arvio

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Contents

Introduction

Sarah Arvio's poem "Memory" is one of forty-nine poems collected in her first book, *Visits to the Seventh*, published in June 2003 by Alfred A. Knopf in New York. Poems in this collection capture traces of dialogue between a woman and several ethereal presences; they talk about the break-up of the woman's love affair and the death of her mother. In "Memory," which first appeared in *Raritan Quarterly*, the poet examines remembrances of the lovers' quarrel that lead to the break-up. *Visits to the Seventh* marks Arvio's literary debut, accomplished by Arvio in her forties after publishing poetry in several literary journals such as *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, and *Best American Poetry 1998*. The poet's dialogues with these visitors□either ghosts of the dead, the voice of Arvio's inner life or a chorus of her poetic muses□speak to the meaning of life and the sense of longing created by the insufficiency of memory. "Memory," like most of Arvio's poems in this collection, is written in free verse, the term typically used to describe non-metrical and unrhymed poetry, common among contemporary poets. Metrical verse derives its structure from a set of formal rules for the length and arrangement of each line. Arvio groups her poems in stanzas often linked together by lines that continue a thought, a piece of dialogue or an action into the following stanza.

Author Biography

Sarah Arvio, author of "Memory" and other poems collected in her first volume of poetry, *Visits from the Seventh*, was born in 1954 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and grew up near New York City among radical Quakers. She was educated at schools abroad and later attended Columbia University, where she studied writing. Arvio could not envision herself as a creative writer, she told *Borzoi Reader* for its website, until she began undergoing psychoanalysis and studying her dreams. "When I thought about writing my own words, I imagined pressing down so hard on the pen that I broke the nib," Arvio said. "When I looked inward I saw nothing but turmoil and grief. I couldn't realize my thoughts; I had a voice but couldn't use it." Soon after turning forty, Arvio found her poetic voice, the product of an "open, amazed mood" that allowed her to listen to her thoughts. She told *Borzoi Reader*: "I found my own thoughts intriguing and even beautiful."

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

In "Memory," a woman still suffering from the break-up with her lover is addressed by the invisible "visitors" who inhabit a "seventh" dimension, the "sixth" being sex, which they have explained in poems that precede this one in the collection. The first line begins with their question: "And do we remember our living lives?"□our lives as they were lived without the revision of memory? In the first, five-line stanza, the woman in the poem recalls the details of a daily life in which strife and death are temporarily absent□details such as the clock measuring seemingly endless time or the door in which a lover enters. Near the end of this stanza, however, the reader becomes unable to deny what is coming, tipped off by language escalating in emotion from the almost quotidian though tender "I love you" to an urgent and anguished "why?" What caused the argument, which the poet does not actually discuss in detail in the poem. What was its now elusive trigger? What did the speaker mean to the lover who broke from her?

Stanza 2

In the second stanza, lines 6 through 10, the poet's unseen visitors reveal to her that death does not take the sting out of memory, improve the quality of its ability to record events, or resolve its conundrums. "You see," the visitors say, "our memories are much like yours, / here a shadow, a sound, a shred, a wisp." But they also frame for her the choice that she has, which will allow her to put aside memory's puzzle. "And what do we want to remember?" one said.

Stanzas 3 and 4

The third and fourth stanzas describe the poet's immediate rebellion. She believes she can improve her memories by summoning the courage to relive the terribly painful emotions this catastrophic lover's quarrel provoked. The third stanza begins, in the first three of five lines, as the poet's prayer: "Never never Oh give me the blurred wish / or the dream or the fact half-forgotten, the leaf in the book but not the read page." She asks for even more, not merely the facts but what they meant, what she can bear to know.

Stubbornly, perhaps, the woman in the poem tells her visitors in the next stanza that she has made a choice. "I recall only the blue dusk," the aftermath of dissolution in its sad and non-negotiable finality, and not the climactic pain of her last argument. But her visitors, made wise by the transformation of death and the realities of life in the untouchable seventh dimension, attempt to be instructive about the inevitable nature of memory. "Do you think you choose?" they say. "If only you could determine your secret determinates." The last line of this penultimate stanza reveals the poet's immediate

reconsideration of her desire to overrule memory as it leads us to the poem's end. Her anguish is once again poignantly apparent.

Stanza 5

In lines 23 to 25 of the last stanza, the narrator's acknowledgement of "that terrible time" recedes, yielding again to the blue transition of dusk and leaving only the essence of catastrophe to the realm of "the inner eye."

Themes

Longing for Life

"Memory" continues to look at the paradox these invisible visitors present to the woman in the poem□her inability to fully examine and appreciate life while she is in the middle of living it, and the visitors' urge to go back to resolve their own issues now that they have the benefit of a perspective earned through death. Other poems in the collection delicately examine the visitors' state of being and their desire to use the woman in these poems vicariously. In this poem, the visitors serve as psychological mentors attempting to instruct her in how to manage the same things they do, such as the pain of loss, while grasping at the straws of memory to make sense of it all.

The Unreliability of Memory

"Memory" examines the distortion of the memory, making it impossible to reassess or sort out events and how they affected not only self-perception but also perceptions of an important, once-loving relationship. The visitors may identify with the woman in the poem, but they are also critical that she does not understand the futility of what she is doing.

Unresolved Issues

The woman in "Memory" longs to know if the last argument she had with her lover killed not only the relationship but also the attraction they once had for each other. She combs her memories, hunting for clues, but can only relive the emotions□regret, anger and fear□that she felt during the argument.

Style

The internal structure of Arvio's poem "Memory" is, unlike a galloping, faithfully iambic Victorian epic, informal and therefore unobtrusive. This allows the poet to construct lines that sound like conversation to the reader. The flexibility of free verse allows the poet a series of stressed syllables, which give the lines a special poetic weight. For example, in the lines "did he recall the blue vein in my wrist / or only the ice-blue burn in my eye?" the poet uses the pounding cadence of "ice-blue burn" to emphasize the anger the argument elicited. Though the poem is relatively informal, Arvio uses sonic devices to emphasize other elements in the poem. The word "why" is rhymed at the end of a line with the word "eye" in the first stanza and again in the final stanza. The structure of the poem may not be guided by the rules of formal convention, but the poem does have symmetry. The poem is composed of five stanzas of five lines each, a neatness that echoes the suggestion of acceptance at the end. The third, fourth and fifth stanzas are each linked by a line that continues a thought introduced in the stanza above it, which reflects the poet's evolving perspective. A dramatic unity is suggested by the rhyming pattern established in the first stanza and repeated in the last. The poem makes maximum use of the word "blue"□a blue vein, ice-blue anger, blue dusk. The opposite of blue, the warmer shades of yellow that Arvio examines in other poems in this collection, is absent, as is red□the color typically associated with both passion and rage. In this poem, memory has rendered all facets of a lover's quarrel and its aftermath in monochromatic hues.

Historical Context

"Memory" is part of a collection of poems that reflect contemporary life in New York City, a city familiar to many Americans, even those who only know the city through movies or the pages of the *New Yorker*. These sometimes funny and erotic poems reflect the world view of a highly educated woman, one who laces her lines with French phrases, references to other poets and classic Hitchcock movies. The woman in these poems is the perfect audience for the aristocratic ramblings of the chorus of invisible visitors that people her work. In contemporary, post-feminist poetry, women writers can enjoy the fruits of liberation from the mandatory roles of child-rearing and housewifery. Their bold, witty work shows how able they are to avoid the self-destructive impulses evident in the poetry of some women writing a generation before, such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Poet Mark Strand, writing for the back of the book, asserts that these poems are neither sad nor confessional. Simply put, a confessional poem is one in which the poet speaks to the reader.

But Rob Neufeld, writing for the Asheville Citizen-Times and once a friend of Arvio's, disagrees. "The poems are, in good measure, confessional and we'd be cheated if they weren't," Neufeld writes, describing the glimpse of the poet taking a contemplative walk down Park Avenue in one poem. Other admirers of Arvio's work, such as New York poet Richard Howard, find links to Arvio's work to that of earlier women writers, such as Christina Rosetti and Virginia Woolf, because of its attentive interest in internal rather than external voices. "The whole series is an articulation of what we used to call 'the inner life': one woman's passionate questioning of her sources," he said. "Memory" is feminine in its self-conscious reflection on lost love and its ear to internal voices, but it is especially contemporary in its un-self-conscious ownership of anger, eroticism and humor. With this freedom, perhaps, comes the insistent flowering of a strong and compelling poetic voice at an age□past forty□that publishers apparently consider to be rare. Contemporary poetry has further pushed the boundaries of language, image, form and voice. Part of Arvio's cultural contribution might be helping to break through another artistic barrier that has constrained and discouraged writers, male and female alike.

Critical Overview

"Memory" is one of forty-nine poems in an award-winning collection hailed as a highly original debut, admired as "a splendidly odd and compelling first book" by the *Washington Post*. *Post* critic Edward Hirsch enjoys Arvio's "nervy, fanciful and unified" poetry and commends her attentiveness to her supernatural guests by calling her a "spiritual apprentice." Roy Olson, writing in *Booklist*, notes that the "poems sparkle with worldly wise wit." Critics and fellow poets enjoy the uniqueness of Arvio's dialogue with the supernatural visitors, and her ability to be both simultaneously funny and erotic in these contemporary odes to life. "Sarah Arvio's poems engage in an agitated description of the inner life," said poet Mark Strand, quoted on the back of Arvio's book. "The voices drop in and out like a beautiful quixotic chorus." Judy Clarence of the *Library Journal* commends Arvio's competence as a poet in avoiding the pitfalls of engaging the supernatural, which she calls "dangerous ground." "Writers who venture in the realm of the occult risk banality," Clarence says, adding that "Arvio's prodigious talent saves her."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Trow is a published poet and writer. In this essay, Trow considers the value of employing supernatural voices as a poetic conceit.

"Memory" and other poems in Sarah Arvio's *Visits from the Seventh* give scant, if any, evidence of how the poet's upbringing in a strict Quaker household, and her subsequent psychoanalysis, affected her poetic voice. These poems are not unique because of their singular cultural references. The only archaisms in speech are the quirky and affected terms of endearment used by the poet's aristocratic invisible visitors. The anger and eroticism of this and other poems are not overblown in the rebellion of an unusually chaste or strict religious environment. "Memory" is not steeped in the self-conscious or hypercritical assessments of the heavily psychoanalyzed. Instead, this poem is open to any woman who experiences the shock of losing a love that had, before the unexpected catastrophe of argument, become a beloved fixture of life.

The origin of the poetry's wry and New York-worldly sense of humor that critics embrace when discussing this unusual collection of poems is not a surprise. Arvio is an educated, already well-decorated poet of diverse professional skills who knows New York City well. But what is unusual is the conceit on which the entire book is founded, a group of visitors□unseen, even to the poet□and their supernatural origin. They are souls who derive their sense of humor and the influence of their commentary from the vantage point of death. While other poets, such as Nobel Prize winner Wistawa Szymborska, unifies the poems of one collection with observations on the human callousness inherent in acts such as terrorism, Arvio constructs an interactive Greek chorus of dead souls and builds a book around their conversations with her.

The chorus seemingly understands its role before the poet does. She is instructed later in the collection, after having become aware of them through the exercise of a post-sexual seventh sense. "'It might / be best," one said, 'to call us a conceit.'" But what purpose does this conceit serve? The voices move in and out of these poems and sometimes require pointed invitations to appear. When they do appear, they cajole and tease, filling in for missing human equivalents, such as a mother who has died, or a lover who has left. To accentuate their elusiveness, these visitors require, like supernatural beings in any genre, that the woman in these poems keep quiet about them or risk losing contact. In "Memory," which appears more than half way into the collection, their capricious playfulness is absent. It is replaced by a more sober consciousness in possession of a secret that has eluded their human companion, who is now preoccupied with the violent quarrel that ended an important romance.

"Memory" is not a fun poem or one of the more lyrical in the collection. This is a pre-memorial poem, written after the death of love but before it is buried. The distance between the poet and her unseen muses is close, more personal and less transcendent. They sit on her shoulder, looking into her past without enjoying the view, something they take particular pleasure in doing in other poems in the collection, such as "Park Avenue." Here the ghostly visitors seem to want to assuage their host's pain by

offering unflinching acceptance—even though they share Arvio's preoccupation with unsettled human relationships and the psychic unrest they have assured her follows lovers to the grave. Longing and regret commingle here with the erotic charge that survives death.

The rift between the lovers in this poem is swift and violent and the memory of love in the face of subsequent loss deteriorates quickly. "What remained of the room and of the night, / the kiss or the argument that ensued." An anguished respect for the danger of uncontrolled emotion remains, too. "Why," the poet asks twice. "Did I forget why I left my home why?" The stylistics of the poem emphasize the question and the role memory plays in the mutability of perception. "Why" is rhymed twice with "eye" in this otherwise informally structured poem. At its first mention, "eye" is literal and specific. It refers to the eye of the narrator and its ice-blue reflection of the cold, hard anger she feels for her lover. At the second mention, the narrator's eye is vulnerable to the violence of a cocktail smashing the wall close by. By the last line, the "eye" becomes realized as a symbol for memory and its abstract function of capturing the time as it passes and before it completely dissolves. This cold anger has frozen memory until it is warmed by the poet's reflection, perhaps making it even more elusive until it is only a stain on the mind's eye.

Looking into her past, the spirits are voyeurs to this anguish and to the narrator's insecurities. "Did he recall the blue veins in my wrist / or only the ice-blue burn in my eye?" The poet wonders, in the end, what she was to her lover. Was she attractive, warm, sensual and beloved? Or will he only remember her as the angry shrew she was when he saw her last? The visitors are consoling, saying she is not different from them, even as they watch her from their supernatural perch. Her memories are inexact, the same as theirs. The narrator remains conflicted, but the voices continue to console, now with condescension. "'And do we want to remember?' one said."

One cannot really chose how to remember one's life, how to set it in the proper context based on externals. The quality of memory does not allow such assurances. "'Do you think you chose?'" the voices say. "'If only you could / determine your secret determinants.'" The narrator's sense of resignation that follows is the product of impasse. With supernatural authority, the voices have contributed to the narrator's understanding of two key points about the nature of memory—its resiliency, invulnerable even to death, and its deeply occult nature, unknowable even to the dead.

For the wisdom of these visitors to resonate, one must accept the use of metaphor with proper respect and recognize its descent from an honorable literary tradition. Critics view *Visits from the Seventh* and its supernatural conceit variously as the foundation of an odd and fanciful collection, an important advance in the poetics of transcendence, or a dangerous flirtation with banality. Judy Clarence of *Library Journal* makes almost deprecating note of Arvio's "flair for the supernatural" and credits her "prodigious talent" for rescuing her from the pitfalls of literary gimmick. Ray Olson, writing in *Booklist*, recognizes Arvio's sagely and sometimes wisecracking visitors as less magic and more the voices of "unuttered thoughts most of us have." Other publications give *Visits from the Seventh* a lineage with more gravitas. A critic from the*New Yorker*, who is quoted in

the paperback publication of Arvio's collection writes "This extraordinary first book of poems takes its place in an authentic line of descent from such landmarks as Yeats's *A Vision* and James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*," an epic trilogy based on Merrill's transcriptions of Ouija board conversations with the poet's deceased friends, as well as Jesus, Plato, Nefertiti, Mercury, the nine muses and Michael the Archangel.

New York poet Richard Howard, quoted in the hardcover publication of Arvio's collection, seems to understand Arvio best, admiring the poems as "the most 'convincing' visitations since Merrill's Ouija-board transcriptions," but noting her possession by personal voices. "The whole series is an articulation of what we used to call 'the inner life': one woman's passionate questioning of her sources and their equally passionate (if often derisive) answers," says Howard, writing for the hardcover edition book jacket. "She has forged her own dialogue of the dead. . . . I love hearing her persuasive voices; they are the woman herself."

Perhaps such a manifestation of Quaker Inner Light and psychoanalysis is a chorus of spiritual advisers, in place to speak to the mysteries of life that can be explained and to identify the ones that cannot. Arvio's invisible visitors are a conceit. The visitors admit as much in "Three Green Stars," which appears in the last few poems of *Visits from the Seventh*. "We were driving in the Jersey meadows / a gray purple sky, roving orange spots, / white clouds lit miasmic yellow. 'It might / be best,' one said, 'to call us a conceit.'" But their voices spring from Arvio's imagination, tilled by years of self-examination, and a cultivated receptivity to self revelation. Their inspired speech has been hidden until Arvio gave them form, like a costume to put on and take off. "Memory" is a poem about a woman talking to her wiser self.

Source: Lisa Trow, Critical Essay on "Memory," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill examines Arvio's poem as a mental battleground on which the speaker's desire to remember and desire to forget wage a war that neither can win.

Arvio's "Memory" is one of those poems that is better served by reading it within the context of the collection that includes it. The purpose of the visitors that come to Arvio as she writes is more substantiated when one can hear the full range of the strange little spirits' admonishments, encouragements, playful quips, and philosophizing in a variety of situations. That said, however, there is enough ammunition in this single poem to lay open the age-old struggle between one's inner-self and one's *other* inner-self, exposing the hapless attempts of an individual to recall the good and forget the bad.

In an interview by poetry editor Deborah Garrison for *The Borzoi Reader Online*, Arvio calls the poems in *Visits from the Seventh* "love poems to life; poems of longing for life." Growing up Quaker, she was taught not to "glorify an afterlife" but to "long for this life." Perhaps these revelations help clarify the opening line of "Memory": "'And do we remember our living lives?'" This line is supposedly spoken by one of the ghostly visitors, but the curious phrase "living lives" is the thing to note, no matter who says it.

While the noun "lives" may invoke countless adjectives to describe it, the word "living" is not typically one of them. It seems redundant. Her use of "lives" implies living. The need to define lives as living suggests that there are other types of lives, lives that may be forgotten or repressed. The latter is most poignantly addressed in this poem.

Each stanza presents a back-and-forth, tit-for-tat banter about fond memories and not-so-fond memories. In the first, the question regarding living lives establishes the central inquiry that the remainder of the poem tries to answer. The speaker is not sure whether she can recall the specific tangibles□"the clock or the door"□or intangibles□"the words 'I love you' or the word 'why'"□of a personal event in her life. One must assume that the episode involves a romantic relationship in trouble, since someone is leaving and someone is asking why. Memory is tricky here. The speaker may not remember an important declaration of love, but she does recall a "blue vein" in her wrist. She does not know, however, whether her lover recalls that part of her or "only the ice-blue burn" in her eye.

Each of these snippets of thought is a part of the living life of the speaker, but she cannot fully accept that they reflect her actual past. The implication is that they are factual recollections because there would be no reason to question the memory of a clock, a door, or a conversation if those things never existed. Even the slightest bit of doubt allows one to repress thoughts that are too painful to accept as fact. The battleground is established between what the speaker thinks she remembers and what she would prefer to question.

In the second stanza, the "room" and the "night" appear to be accepted, if not desired, memories, but then there is a quick switch to ambiguity when the speaker tries to decide whether "the kiss or the argument"—or both—occurred next. Kissing and arguing obviously connote two very different events in a relationship, although they may both certainly happen in the same setting. But juxtaposing a pleasant moment with an unpleasant one suggests an unsettling battle between good recollections and bad.

In *The Borzoi Reader Online* interview, Arvio says this about the imaginary beings that visit her when she writes "Their memory is stronger than mine, and their associative powers are stranger and more vivid." Interestingly, in the poem "Memory," one of her visitors remarks, "'You see, our memories are much like yours, / here a shadow, a sound, a shred, a wisp.'" The point is not so much the contradictory opinions about the speaker's versus the visitors' recall ability, but the fact that the idea of memory is an important presence in the struggle of the inner-selves.

Just as important are the words used to describe the memories of both the human and the spiritual visitors—shadowy, shredded, wispy. The uncertainty and incompleteness of memories make them easier to repress at will. However, as is clear in the poem, even those intentionally stifled have a way of creeping into an individual's mind when least expected or least desired. The italicized lines provide the best defense for the repression side. They answer the question, "'And do we want to remember?'" with a resounding, "'*Never never*'" and then proceed with an explanatory list: a "*blurred wish*" is better than a "*fact half-forgotten*," what people think they see is better than what they actually see, what people wish to feel is better than what they really feel, and so on.

The fourth stanza of "Memory" reveals a rather desperate attempt by the speaker to simplify the battle going on in her head. She confidently uses the phrase, "I choose to recall" only to be immediately admonished by a visitor who asks sarcastically, "'Do you think you choose?'" This is perhaps the most poignant indication that the war on her mental battleground is one that cannot be won. She is not in control of her "secret determinants," and if not she, then who?

The latter part of the poem provides the greatest evidence of why the speaker wages such a frustrating war of emotions within herself. Again, she asks a question that implies an irony—if she does not really "recall the cocktail as it smashed / against the wall there, so close to [her] eye," then why ask the question? The details are too specific to be a total figment of her imagination. On the one hand, she longs to forget that such a violent event ever occurred in her life and on the other hand she cannot help but remember it.

In the final stanza of "Memory," Arvio makes a subtle connection to the first stanza, in which the word "why" is suggestive of something bad about a relationship but not conclusive. It is not clear who is asking why in the first stanza, the speaker or her lover, but in the final one, it is clearly the speaker who ponders the question. Again, the query is rhetorical at best. Is it likely that one who leaves her home, her lover, and life as she knows it would actually forget why? No, but the implication is that her mind would like to forget. In reality, she cannot, and so the struggle continues in its back-and-forth cycle.

In spite of the confusion, the speaker cannot be blamed for wanting to forget the "full events" of what she calls "that terrible time." Attempting to repress the memory of unfortunate or tragic moments in one's life is a fairly common human endeavor. With the passage of time, the speaker believes her memory of the events surrounding the break-up of her relationship is "dissolving into the deep hues of dusk," but dissolving does not necessarily mean going away. It may mean simply changing form. In this case, the "essence" of past events are now left to the "inner eye," but is the inner eye still not a part of the person who is trying to forget?

Arvio ends the poem here, without fully disclosing what the speaker's "inner eye" really is. Most likely, it is that part of the human psyche that accepts the truth no matter how painful it may be. Think of it as a kind of receptor that keeps its feelers out for the true "essence" of all the events that happen in a human's lifetime. The inner eye never turns away sad or bitter memories of the worst events in spite of attempts by the rest of the mind to do just that. This inescapable dichotomy is the main fuel for the battle of emotions that rages within the speaker. She may placate one side for a while, but the other side always chimes in with thoughts she would prefer not to entertain.

Perhaps this is the reason for the visitors. They not only act as little alter egos of the speaker but also allow her to carry on mental conversations with herself when plain, simple thinking is not enough or when it provides undesirable results. Thoughts or memories of certain events in her "living" life lead only to despondency, so handing that chore off to imaginary friends alleviates the pain of a direct confrontation. In "Memory," the visitors admit that they "*never*" really want to remember, that they much prefer wishes to facts or what they long to see instead of what they really see. Yet they are able at least to address the painful truth when they must. This is not always the case for the speaker.

The speaker tends to use the visitors to keep a foothold in reality even though it is not a pleasant thing to do. While it is arguable that she may feel less emotional turmoil with a few less voices popping in and out of her head, the questions, proclamations, and quirky suggestions made by the visitors prod her into staying focused. If she gave in wholly to her desire to forget, allowing this side of the inner-self war to win, one would have to consider what has really been won. Repression and avoidance will take their toll somewhere down the line. Let the battle continue, however, and the speaker herself endures.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Memory," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Read the rest of the poems collected in Arvio's first volume of poetry, *Visits from the Seventh*. Compare Arvio's poems with the poetry of other American women such as Sylvia Plath, Maxine Kumin, Anne Sexton, Denise Levertov and Rita Dove. What makes these poems uniquely feminine?

What elements of poetic structure does Arvio employ in "Memory" and other poems in *Visits from the Seventh*? What might their function be? Compare the structure of this poem with the structure of a poem by a modern formalist poet such as Robert Frost, Richard Wilbur or Anthony Hecht as well as neo-formalists such as Rhina P. Espaillat, Dick Davis and Dana Giola.

What might the color blue represent in the poem "Memory?" Compare the use of blue in this poem to the use of pink, yellow, white, green and aqua in other poems in this collection. How does color allow the poet to create not only a picture in the mind's eye, but also a mood?

Compare the supernatural voices captured by Ephraim and the others in James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*. What relationship do they have with their human medium? How do these supernatural conversations differ from those that spring from the relationship Arvio's unseen visitors have with the woman in Arvio's poetry?

What Do I Read Next?

In "Park Avenue," which also appears in *Visits from the Seventh* (2002), the poet describes a walk along the streets of New York, giving her invisible visitors the "intimate view" of the city they crave, and writing bits of their commentary down on scraps of paper.

In her poem, "Motherlessness," also from *Visits from the Seventh* (2002), Arvio describes "the hole in the skin of her soul" left by the loss of her mother.

Ezra Pound uses foreign words in *The Cantos (1—109)* (1964), a technique employed by Arvio in *Visits from the Seventh*.

"Ode to a Nightingale," by John Keats, from *The Complete Poems* (1988), offers a vehicle for poetic transcendence in the form of an unreachable bird.

Arvio's work has been compared to James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982), which is based on extensive transcriptions Merrill and his housemate David Jackson took from a Ouija board. *The Changing Light at Sandover* reports the messages of Merrill's deceased friends as well as mythic, historical, and literary figures such as Gertrude Stein, William Butler Yeats, Richard Wagner, Homer, Jesus, Mohammed and the angels Michael and Gabriel, as well as the nine muses.

Further Study

Graham, David, and Kate Sontag, eds., *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*, Graywolf Press, 2001.

After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography is a compilation of twenty-eight essays by poets Billy Collins, Yusef Komunyakaa, Louise Glück, and others examining the persistent influence of confessional poetry on contemporary verse.

Komunyakaa, Yusef, and David Lehman, eds., *Best American Poetry 2003*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003.

Best American Poetry 2003 is one in a series of eagerly-awaited annual collections of contemporary poetry. This issue, by decorated Vietnam veteran Komunyakaa□an African American poet from the South, includes the work of well-established poets such as Rita Dove and Billy Collins as well as emerging talent such as Natasha Trethewey.

Schmidt, Elizabeth, ed., *Poems of New York*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

Poems of New York is an anthology of poetry by poets who have made New York City their subject, beginning with Walt Whitman. Schmidt began collecting poems to celebrate New York City's unique character and vitality after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Strand, Mark, ed., *The Contemporary American Poets*, Signet Classics, 2000.

The Contemporary American Poets is an anthology for the poetry beginner. It includes seminal poetry from the contemporary movement in the United States, written by poets such as A. R. Ammons, Sylvia Plath, Richard Howard, Charles Simic, and James Merrill.

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"Arvio, Sarah," in *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, September 11, 2003.

Arvio, Sarah, *Visits from the Seventh: Poems*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

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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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