Midnight Verses Study Guide

Midnight Verses by Anna Akhmatova

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"Midnight Verses" is a late poem by Anna Akhmatova, who is considered one of Russia's most important poets of the twentieth century. Akhmatova came to fame immediately upon the publication of her first collection of poetry in 1912. She was recognized for her powerful and moving love poetry, which explained little, and instead relied on concrete imagery. Her literary career was disrupted by the Russian Revolution; soon after taking power, the government of the Soviet Union sought to suppress those writers it deemed to have a political viewpoint that did not support Communism. For years, Akhmatova could not publish her poetry. She did not even dare write it down, because writers were commonly sent to jail for things they had written. Until the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, Akhmatova was virtually unheard of outside the Soviet Union.

With a thaw in the Soviet government's policy, Akhmatova's fame spread across the world in the 1950s and 1960s. She traveled to Italy and England to accept awards, and was twice a nominee for the Nobel Prize. The short poems comprising "Midnight Verses" were written over the years from 1963-1965, shortly before Akhmatova's death. "Midnight Verses" was first published in her book *The Flight of Time* (1965). It is currently available in *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova* (2002).

Author Biography

Anna Akhmatova was born on June 23, 1888, in the Russian town of Bolshoy Fontan, near the resort town Odessa. Her real name was Anna Andreyevna Gorenko: the pen name she used was her grandmother's. She began publishing her poetry in 1907. The first person to publish her poetry was Nicholas G. Gumilyov, who was himself a major Russian poet of the early twentieth century, one of the founders of the influential Acmeist movement. Akhmatova and Gumilyov were married in 1910: they were intellectually well matched but emotionally distant and ended up divorcing in 1918, after having one son. Meanwhile, Akhmatova had become a famous literary figure in Russia after the publication of her first book, *Evening*, in 1912, and her fame continued to grow.

The Communist party, which took control over Russia in 1917, had Gumilyov executed for treason in 1921. Akhmatova was considered anti- Communist, and as such, her works were banned by the government from 1925 to 1940. During those years, she had a few scholarly works published, but her poetry could not be written down for fear that it would be used against her politically; instead, she recited poems to her friends, who remembered it and recited it to others.

During World War II, Akhmatova's poems were allowed into state-sponsored publications. After the war, her work was banned again, and Akhmatova lived in poverty until 1953, when Joseph Stalin, the dictatorial premier of the Soviet Union, died. The poems Akhmatova had written over her long lifetime gained her an international reputation. She was a finalist for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1958 and in 1965, and she traveled to England, one of her few trips away from Soviet Russia, in 1965 to receive an honorary Ph.D. from Oxford. The short poems comprising "Midnight Verses" were written over a period of time from 1963-1965, shortly before Akhmatova's death. They were first published in her book *The Flight of Time*, which was published in 1965. Akhmatova died in 1966 in Leningrad (St. Petersburg).

Plot Summary

In Place of a Dedication

"Midnight Verses" begins with a brief introductory piece that establishes the mood of the poem's speaker and puts readers in the mood for what is to follow. The first two lines concern the speaker's relationship to vast stretches of nature. Visually, readers are shown open vistas of the ocean's waves and entire forests, but not any individual person. In the second line, the relationship to the sky is an uneasy one: the sky is presented as being enamel, which gives a hard coating to cookware and pottery, while the speaker is said to be "sketched onto" it. The speaker is thus seen in the clear sky, but is not a part of the sky.

The last two lines of this introduction establish the emotional situation that the poem is to deal with: the difficulty of being separated from a lover, which is, though bad, still not as bad as a casual meeting with that person.

Elegy Before the Coming of Spring

The first stanza of this section introduces the poem's overriding theme of death, using the imagery of snowfall, of silence, and of night. The intoxication of the second line indicates the illogical feeling watching the snow brings out in the speaker. In line three, the poem mentions Ophelia, who, in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, is driven to suicide when Hamlet abruptly spurns her. By bringing her up, Akhmatova establishes a link between death and love.

The second stanza of this poem refers to the impending death of the speaker's lover. The intimacy of love is captured by the phrase "the one who appeared only to me." This lover, though, is not fully focused on the poem's speaker, as death is spoken of as someone he is engaged to marry ("betrothed to"). The emotional distance between them is highlighted by the fact that he has already said goodbye, thereby ending their relationship, but still has remained with the speaker after their connection is severed.

First Warning

The speaker recalls how often death has played a role in her life, and how it has made her withdraw into herself. The first line of this section□"What is it to us"□poses a question that is never answered, raising the type of mystery that is characteristic of Akhmatova's poetry. The best that she can do to address this mystery is to examine the things that she does not have to offer her lover. She is not a dream, a delight, or paradise (a reference to heaven, or the ultimate comfort upon death). The "wreath" referred to implies death by giving readers the visual image of the veins that surround the center of an eye. The speaker thus acknowledges her own aloofness from her lover, her inability to connect.

Through the Looking Glass

Death is again personified here, as it was in the first section, as the lover of the poet's lover. In this case, it is given physical characteristics of youth and beauty that make it a formidable competitor. As a result, both people find that their lives revolve around their suppressed knowledge that death is nearby, never really mentioning it but becoming more and more fearful.

The final four lines of this section consider the implications of this sublimated knowledge of death. It is considered an "infernal circle" because of the way that it interferes with their relationship. In the end, though, Akhmatova considers the possibility that it is not the relationship that is real and being interrupted, that love holds some broader truth that goes beyond matters of life and death.

Thirteen Lines

This segment of the poem deals with the lover's death. This poem's attitude toward death is the opposite of the one that is normally expressed. Death is described with positive, beautiful images, such as freedom, a rainbow, sunlight, song and wine. The only thing that disturbs the speaker about death is that it is her job, or fate, to contradict death with her writing. She is the "assassin of that divine word," a phrase that shows her job to be destructive and death to be the will of God. She says that, despite her desire as a writer to analyze the "blessed moment" of death, she "almost" managed to honor it with silence.

The Call

This segment of the poem concerns the speaker's plans to work the death of her lover into her artistry. She shows a guilty feeling about the act of writing, as if she is taking advantage of her lover, who will be found "guilty without appeal" because he cannot defend himself from how she portrays him. Having once been part of her life, he will be remembered only for the way that he is portrayed in her poetry, and the speaker of the poem shows here that she is aware of her responsibility to his memory.

The last line of this section, which makes a connection between death and silence, approaches the situation as a self-fulfilling prophecy: it says that the lover's death *will* be equated with silence, while readers know, from "Elegy Before the Coming of Spring," that the poet actually has established this relationship throughout this poem.

The Visit at Night

While the previous section referred to how the poet will invoke the memory of her dead lover, this section addresses the ways in which the lover's presence will come into her consciousness without being invited. The third line implies that the lover will come into

her mind through art, particularly the music of eighteenth century Italian composer Antonio Vivaldi. The dead lover will read the palm of the poem's speaker: while this is generally a way of telling the future, the poem says that it will actually reveal nothing new, but only "the same miracles" that have always been there.

The poem does not predict death to be a way of finding freedom, as it is often thought to be. The dead person will be wracked with anxiety and will thus be pulled away from this visit, "into the icy waves," an echo of the first line of "In Place of a Dedication."

And the Last

At the end of the poem, Akhmatova once more personifies death, and draws its connection between artistic inspiration and grief. The first stanza talks about how death watched the poem's speaker and her lover from above, how they looked upon it (or "her") not as a cause for joy, but as something to fear. The second stanza refers to the ironic stance that the lovers took toward death: when they were able to focus on it with their rational minds during the day, they smiled on it, and saw it as a natural object like a bird or a flower. At night, though, their unconscious minds feared it, and the thought of death strangled them.

In the third stanza, death awaits, pressing against sleepless pillows. Regardless of all of the justifications that have been made in the dead lover's eulogy, death comes to the poem's speaker, night after night, and, instead of offering the comforting words that a poet can make up to ease any desperate situation, it "murmurs some accursed lines."

In Place of an Epilogue

This brief section, outside of the "story" of the poem, reflects on the way that lovers think alike. Rather than dreaming different dreams, neither of them was able to escape the dream of impending death. In the last line, this poem about death resolves with a warm and positive image, which compares death, once it finally does arrive, to spring's arrival.

Themes

Death

This entire poem represents a reflection on death: on the people who have been lost to the poem's speaker, and the impending death of someone close to her. Death is presented in several different ways. After the section called "In Place of a Dedication," the poem jumps immediately into portraying death as silence with the imagery of snow falling among trees. This stanza ends with death personified as a silence that sings to those who are aware of it.

Later in the poem, in the third section, death is presented as a young, beautiful woman, who is competing with the poem's speaker for her lover's attention. It is always present between them, always in the room with them. Even when they are apart, they are both aware of it.

The last sections of the poem deal with awareness of death after it has occurred. The poet wonders what she will say about the now-dead lover in section 5, "The Call." In the section following that, she considers how the memory of the lover will return to her when she least expects it, such as when she is listening to music. In section 7 she tries to look at death, not as it is expected to be or as it is in memory, but as it really is: instead of being glorious or horrific, it "murmurs some accursed lines." Death is, in the end, unintelligible, not because it is mysterious but because it is inarticulate, and just vaguely hostile.

Overall, this poem takes a position that death is a positive part of nature. This is evident in the way that section 1 presents dying as spring, the time traditionally associated with life, following the snowy winter of worrying about the coming of death. Akhmatova returns to this idea in the final section, "In Place of an Epilogue," which shows death as a dream that both the poet and her lover experienced, presenting that dream as "powerful \ As spring's arrival." In this way, "Midnight Verses" both acknowledges the depths of human fear about death and also accepts it as a positive ending place, just as the spring positively resolves the winter.

Language and Meaning

The speaker of this poem openly acknowledges her job as a poet, even when it does not necessarily mean that her job is a morally correct one. In "The Call," she is somewhat sardonic about the fact that she is certain to use her lover's death in her poetry, aware that he is sentenced to such a fate "Because you came close to me, \ If only for a moment..." Although this section makes the poet seem opportunistic, there is other evidence that only a poetic understanding of an event as important to the human psyche as death can make the terrible knowledge that it is becoming bearable. In several places, the poet refers to herself as an observer, as in "In Place of a

Dedication," where she describes herself as being everywhere, looking down on the earth "sketched on the sky's enamel," or in section 2 where she describes her eye in detail as it takes in the facts. The poem is a struggle between the meaning that language can give to life and an event like death that defies meaning.

In "Thirteen Lines," death is symbolized as "the word," and dying is pronouncing "the word." This makes a direct relationship between the act of dying and the act of creating meaning by turning something into language. This moment of simultaneously capturing reality through language and dying is shown to be a moment of liberation, of escaping from captivity.

Reconciliation

Much of what holds the nine parts of this poem together is the poet's desperate struggle to reconcile the sorrow and mystery of a loved one's death with the need to go on with her own life. She sees death as a sexual competitor, as a looming threat, and as a final triumphant liberation, but the poem conveys her sense of frustration because she can only know what it is like vicariously, by observing its effect on someone else. In the later sections she describes what life will be like after her lover's death: how she will try to make sense of it in her work, how he will come to her again in the night, through music, when her consciousness is not as guarded. After trying different ways of looking at death, of understanding it and accepting it, the poem ends by noting its power. Ironically, the struggle to reconcile with the idea of death is made pointless because it is an inevitable force whether one reconciles one's mind to it or not.

Style

Personification

Death is presented in several different ways in this poem. One of the more striking images of death is when it is shown as a pretty young woman in "Through the Looking Glass." Here, death is a presence that neither the speaker of the poem nor her lover can ignore. The title of this section links death to the speaker, making a connection between her younger self and the death that looms ahead in old age. In "And the Last," death is described as "looming above us," in the way that the poem's speaker described herself as being in the sky in "In Place of a Dedication." The poem is concerned with the ways that death is unknowable. In the attempt to explain death it not only turns this concept into a person, but gives it characteristics of the person that the poem's speaker knows best herself.

Point of View

Poetry often relies on the first person point of view as a way of giving a personal, emotional tone to the telling of the poem. The first person is the use of "I" or "me" in describing the action, and Akhmatova uses this device consistently throughout the poem. Readers generally assume that the first person narrator is similar in background and circumstance to the poet, even though many poets will create a persona with which to hide their true feelings.

This poem also uses the second person form of address, speaking to an unidentified "you." Like the first person, the second person often helps to certify the authenticity of the emotions that hold the poem together. Readers feel that they have come into a circumstance in which the principle characters already know each other and take their relationship to one another for granted. The second person form of address requires readers to imagine what the other person is like from the details of the poem, with no other information. In this case, readers can sense the emotional connection between the two main characters from the fact that "In Place of a Dedication" says that a meeting between them would be more difficult than "separation," a word that would not be used if this strong emotion were hatred. The fact that there are two people, with a strong bond between them, lets Akhmatova explore her subject in more depth, within a social situation.

Historical Context

Stalinist Repression

Akhmatova wrote "Midnight Verses" during a "thaw" in the Soviet Union's stance toward its country's artists. For much of her adult life, she had been unable to write poetry, and had stood by watching friends and relatives jailed and executed because of their political views.

When Akhmatova began publishing in 1912, Russia was a relatively open society with a severely unbalanced economic system, with severe wealth for a few and economic suffering for most. The Russian Revolution of 1917 transferred the country's power to a communist system aimed at economic equality. In 1921, Russia became part of the newly-formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The Soviet Union ruled its citizens with complete authority over all social and cultural activities. A secret police force was established in the early 1920s to find any citizens who opposed the gov- ernment and have them arrested. Artists whose work was not approved as being supportive of communist ideals were suppressed. Some, like Akhmatova, were simply forbidden publication; others' like her son Lev, spent decades in prison camps in freezing climates in Siberia; still others, like Akhmatova's first husband Nikolai Gumilev, were executed as traitors. These totalitarian policies, first begun under Vladimir Lenin, were expanded in 1924 when Lenin died and Joseph Stalin assumed power.

The Cold War

Stalin's reign over the Soviet Union from 1924 until his death in 1953 is considered one of the cruelest and deadliest in modern history, rivaling those of Hitler and Pol Pot. It is estimated that 43 million Soviet citizens were killed by the government during his reign. Since the Soviet Union was closed to the West, estimates about its activities are rough at best. The term "Iron Curtain" came into use after World War II to describe the way that this huge country was shut off from the rest of the world.

By the time that "Midnight Verses" was published in 1965, the Soviet Union was considered one of the world's two "Superpowers," competing to sway other countries over to a communist way of life while the other superpower, the United States, promoted capitalism. The competition between the two was called "the Cold War" because, unlike a "hot" war, there was never any direct fighting between the two opponents. In the post-Stalin era, the Soviet government allowed artists more freedom, and some Soviet literature was allowed to leak out through the Iron Curtain. In 1957, when Russian novelist Boris Pasternak won the Nobel Prize for Literature, the government deemed the book to be unflattering to the Soviet cause and therefore made Pasternak refuse the

honor. But, the very fact that a Soviet writer's work had been available to capture worldwide attention showed that the government was softening its grip on artists.

In 1964, while Akhmatova was writing this poem, there was a coup d'état in the Soviet Union. Nikita Khrushchev, who was associated with the country's policy of stern defiance of American threats during the Cold War (including the 1963 Cuban Missile Crisis, during which the United States and Soviet Union came close to firing nuclear weapons at each other) was replaced by Leonid Brezhnev. Brezhnev's rule was marked by an increase in Soviet interaction with the outside world. While previous Soviet regimes had tried to isolate the country and suppress its citizens, Brezhnev tried to form bonds and to make the world understand and admire Soviet culture. The government of the Soviet Union still kept strict control over the lives of its citizens until it was disbanded in 1991, but the 1960s marked the start of a new internationalism.

Critical Overview

Anna Akhmatova was considered to be an important figure in Russian poetry after her first book was published. The love poems in her first book, *Vecher (Evening)* (1912), explored the subject of love from all angles, giving, according to Russian critic Leonid I. Strakhovsky, "all the things that everyone might feel and understand, though perhaps less deeply and personally than the poet." Strakhovsky, in his 1949 book about Akhmatova and her contemporaries, Gumilyov and Mandelstam, went on to note that years of inactivity had not changed her much despite having been silenced by the Soviet government for fifteen years. "Her voice was now reduced almost to a whisper and her eyes were dimmed as she looked at the present through the mirror of the past," he wrote of her 1940 collection, "But her mastery was still the same." *The Times Literary Supplement*, reviewing her *Selected Poems* soon after her death, similarly captures the "whisper" image, noting that that book "ranges from whispers to anguished screams, from personal happiness to the most acute personal distress. It is lyrical, modest, feminine, narrow in tone and form."

As years have passed, and her poetry has become more widely published in the West, Akhmatova has come for many to stand as the quintessential female Russian poet. As such, she is seen as a link between classical, pre-twentieth century poetry and poetry that is being written today. In part, this view is connected to her circumstances, with government suppression freezing her career in its prime, making her a poet of both youth and old age, while many of her contemporaries never made it to old age but died in government prisons. "Anna Akhmatova's personality was phenomenal," Nilokai Bannikov explained in a journal article celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of her birth. "It was not given to any woman in Russian poetry before her to express herself with such convincing, lyrical power, to speak out so independently that her voice added once and for all a special□Akhmatovan□ note to the art of the Russian poetic word." The extreme circumstances of her life are unavoidable in considering the literary worth of her poetry, and critics, who generally find no fault with her writing, tend to focus on how her unusual story made her able to speak for a whole generation of Russians.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, Kelly looks at Akhmatova's poem without connecting it to the events of her life.

It is very rare to find a discussion of Russian poet Anna Akhmatova's work without a corresponding discussion of her life story. This is entirely understandable. Her life was fascinating, especially to American readers who would find its events difficult to imagine within the scope of their own experiences. Akhmatova was a poetic sensation at a young age, so popular that, while she was still in her twenties, a party game based on her poetry was played in fashionable parlors in St. Petersburg, with contestants trying to guess what would follow a line of her poetry read aloud. Then, for years that would normally have represented the apex of a literary career, her voice was silenced by the Soviet government, only to re-emerge after the 1953 death of Joseph Stalin. Her life, therefore, offers scholars an easy dichotomy of "before" and "after," neatly laid out for study. It is a fascinating life story, drawing readers to it as much as the clenched density of Akhmatova's poetry blocks readers out. There is a natural temptation to fill the hole in the middle of her literary career with biographical information, and from there, to expand the facts of her life with the hope that they might explain all unknown factors in her work.

Akhmatova's life story is so compelling that people naturally want to attach it to anything with her name, particularly her poetry. If there ever were a case for studying a poet's work in relation to the person's life, hers seems to be the one. There is, however, at least one school of thought that questions the appropriateness of introducing any information into poem analysis that comes from outside of the words that actually appear on the page. This way of thought holds that the author's life, fascinating though it may be, has little relevance to the content of the poem. Whether produced by Anna Akhmatova in her twilight years or by a high school dropout trying a first poem, a poem is or is not a work of art, and so these critics hold that knowing too much about an author's life is just a way of giving in to irrelevant distraction.

This lack of context makes poetry like Akhmatova's difficult to cope with, since it wipes away clues that ease understanding, but it also affirms the poem's value as an artistic piece. A poem like Akhmatova's "Midnight Verses," for instance, makes more sense to the casual reader who supplements the facts that are immediately apparent with the knowledge that it was written late in Akhmatova's lifetime, that she had seen most of her peers die violent or mysterious deaths and was at the time watching the ranks of those who were left be thinned out by old age. Others can be more specific, guessing at the identity of a real-life person represented as "you" in the poem. The true test of the poem's strength, however, is in how well it can speak to human existence without being tied to the experiences of any one particular human. The imagery should contain enough clues in the ways that it all interrelates for readers to walk away from the poem knowing what the writer wants them to know.

"Midnight Verses" is, in fact, a poem that seems to be challenging readers to read it within its own context. It is a poem about death, mournful in every line, crippled by the

fact that the speaker is willing to admit to competence in almost all cerebral activities except for dealing with permanent loss. The overall structure is fragmented, a stylistic arrangement that always raises the question of how any one part relates to the others. The poems that comprise it may have been written separately, but the fact that they are presented together means that the author wants readers to question their differences as well as their similarities. Also, the isolated sections come in two different levels of significance: in addition to the main sequence of poems, numbered one through seven, there are the introductory and concluding segments that are both part of the poem and at the same time outside it. Add to this the levels of repetition and nuance in Akhmatova's use of imagery, and there turns out to be enough to ponder about this poem without ever thinking about the circumstances it came from.

Among the many ideas in "Midnight Verses" that refer to other parts of the poem are the three central ideas of silence, overview, and the unstoppable march of time. These are represented, roughly, by forest, sky, and the waves, the three images that open up the section called "In Place of a Dedication."

The forest first appears in connection with silence in "Elegy Before the Coming of Spring." Snowstorms are not known for being particularly loud, but the one mentioned here is "hushed" by the pine trees, which block out wind and only admit silent falling snow. This idea of trees as silent witnesses to the world is revised in the fourth section, "Thirteen Lines." Here, the trees are not pines, which are evergreen and do not go through the usual cycle of shedding leaves and blooming that deciduous trees undergo. They are birches, which are so sensitive to the passing seasons that they not only change leaves, but their bark too. Section 4, with its nondescript, generic title, is actually one of celebration, full of rainbows and sunlight and wine. The birch trees, unlike the pines, do not let snow blanket the earth under them: they provide a "sacred canopy."

The sky plays an important role in this poem because it is used to establish, in the introductory section, the speaker's doubts about the value of her own talent. The line "I am sketched on the sky's pure enamel" implies a sense of grandeur in that this person is looking down on the world, but it also implies that she is out of her element, an intruder who is in the sky but not really part of it. Characterizing the sky as enamel emphasizes its hardness, its protective coating, meant to hold things out, as Teflon does today. Characterizing the speaker as being "sketched" emphasizes the temporary rather than permanent, the quickness and incompleteness of her being. This is important because the same self-doubt is conveyed in "First Warning," which ends with a focus on the eye: while watching from above seems somewhat impersonal, this eye is silent like the trees, and therefore foreboding. This cold human silence is contrasted in section 7 with death, "like a star over the sea," circling above like a bird. The speaker of this poem reveals a complex self-image, which sees death itself as being at times more compassionate. No knowledge about Akhmatova's difficult life is needed to see the struggle to be human that is presented on the page.

The other image that repeats throughout the poem is that of waves. Though mentioned in the introductory section, that mention amounts to little, just a location that the speaker wanders past. It is not until the end of the poem, section 7, that the waves show their

significance. There is no general cultural reference to the "ninth deadly wave" which Akhmatova mentions in the poem, but there is a general belief that the waves come in cycles, reaching their highest point with the seventh wave before starting a new round of seven again. Assuming that this is the point of reference, then the ninth wave would be one that is well past the apex, twice removed from the height. As a metaphor for life, this would indicate old age, an assumption borne out by the fact that the whole poem speaks rather freely of impending death. Waves might not mean exactly the same thing in every place where they appear in the poem, but they do have an essential characteristic of carrying one away toward death. For instance, it is possible that the final lines of section 6 might not refer to age, but the "icy waves" they refer to are definitely a sign of dying.

The way Akhmatova used imagery in her poetry left gaps in meaning: she presented solid, tangible images, but did not explain their relationship to one another. From the rough fit of the seven poems and ancillary matter in "Midnight Verses," readers can assume that she meant there to be places where the images did not dovetail with one another, but instead suggested each other or reminded readers of things brought up in other sections, making their effect a result of feelings, not a result of intellectual consideration. When a poem does not provide a complete picture, there is a temptation to fill in the missing parts with information from the author's life. With poetry like this, though, a better approach is to listen a little closer, to trust that the similarities and inconsistencies are there for a good reason.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "Midnight Verses," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Henningfeld is a professor of English at Adrian College where she teaches poetry, literature, and critical theory and writes widely for a variety of educational publications. In this essay, Henningfeld examines Akhmatova's use of imagery and allusion in developing the themes of isolation and loss throughout her poem.

Although she was born in the last year of the nineteenth century, Akhmatova is in every way a child of the twentieth century. Her poetry placed her at the center of the modernist movement as it developed in Russia, and her life encompassed some of the most difficult, invigorating, and brutal years of Russian history.

Akhmatova's life, like her verse, frequently reveals the paradoxes of living in the twentieth century. Although widely acknowledged as one of the greatest of all Russian poets, Akhmatova and her work nonetheless remained largely inaccessible to Western readers until the last years of the twentieth century. A leader of the acmeist movement (acmeism is a movement in poetry that arose as a response against symbolism, rejecting both symbolism's ornate style and interest in mysticism) in poetry, Akhmatova was at the heart of a literary revolution. Yet the political revolution in her country ended up silencing her for decades. A final paradox is that Akhmatova's poetry, so much a product of its time, is often analyzed biographically rather than poetically. That is, critics often look to Akhmatova's life and to the historical time in which she lived as their sole means of analysis. This approach often overlooks the literary value of her work. As David N. Wells notes in his book, *Anna Akhmatova: Her Poetry*, "The biographical fallacy is one into which Akhmatova's critics have fallen all too easily: her work is important as *literature* through its ability to generalise experience and to move the reader by the power of language."

It is not a surprise, therefore, to find that most critics reading "Midnight Verses" make much of the connection between the poem cycle and a visit to Akhmatova by Isaiah Berlin, an important British scholar and diplomat, in 1945; in the notes accompanying *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova* translated by Judith Hemschemeyer, Roberta Reeder states that "Of the seven poems in this cycle, four refer to the meeting with Isaiah Berlin." The encounter figures large in Akhmatova's poems, letters, and prose, as evidenced by her ongoing inclusion of Berlin in her poems, even twenty years after her last sight of him. This may be partially due to the increasingly harsh restrictions on the poet and on the poet's son by the Soviet government after her meeting with Berlin.

However, while this meeting may underpin many of the poems of the cycle, and while any reader of the poems ought to be familiar with the relationship between Akhmatova and Berlin, the poems themselves are more than echoes of a past visit. They also function as literature, as Wells argues. "Midnight Verses" is a poem that, through image and allusion, delves deeply into the themes of isolation and loss.

In an article in *New England Review*, Roberta Reeder describes Akhmatova's lyrics as "short fragments of simple speech that do not form a logical coherent pattern. Instead,

they reflect the way we actually think□the links between the images are emotional, and simple everyday objects are charged with psychological associations." Thus, the reader finds the poems of "Midnight Verses" fragmented, lyrical, oblique, and highly allusive, always referring to something or someone just out of the reader's sight.

Akhmatova embeds images and allusions throughout the poem, both through her use of epigraphs and metaphor. Opening the cycle, for example, she uses lines from an earlier poem cycle, "Poem without a Hero," as an epigraph: "*The mirror dreams only of the mirror, / Silence watches over silence . . .*" This epigraph introduces several important images including the mirror, dreams, and silence, images that Akhmatova uses repeatedly across a career that spanned some fifty years. Indeed, the image of the mirror is so significant in Akhmatova's poetry that Reeder chooses to call her biography of the poet in *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova* "Mirrors and Masks: The Life and Poetic Works of Anna Akhmatova."

The use of the mirror in "Midnight Verses," therefore, is of great importance. In the first place, a mirror offers a reflection of whatever object or person is in front of it. Although the mirror is a flat surface, it fools the eye in its representation of reality, forcing the viewer to experience depth and dimension where there are none. The common expression, "look into the mirror," reveals this illusion. Quite literally, one cannot look "into" a mirror at all; one can only look at a mirror's flat surface. In the second place, while a viewer might believe that a mirror cannot lie, in truth, all that a mirror *can* do is lie. For example, in producing an image, a mirror distorts reality in multiple ways: the image is always reversed and the image is never the same size as the object being reflected. That Akhmatova introduces the poems of "Midnight Verses" with such an image suggests that the reader might consider the connection between poem and mirror. Like a mirror, a poem would appear to reflect some reality; in this case, a midnight visit from Isaiah Berlin. Yet, the epigraph warns the reader that like a mirror, a poem can obscure what it seems to reveal. "Midnight Verses," after all, is not the meeting itself, but rather an allusive representation of that meeting. As Reeder writes in *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, "Though often inspired by real events or emotions, her poems may mask more than they reveal. Akhmatova warned against scrutinizing her lyrics for insight into her thoughts and feelings: 'Lyric verse is the best armor, the best cover. You don't give yourself away.'"

Further, the mirror's dreaming offers another point of entry into the poem. A dream, like a mirror, is a reflection of reality, not reality itself. That the "mirror dreams only of the mirror" suggests an arrangement that sometimes happens in hotel bathrooms, where one mirror reflects the image from another, into infinity. Looking into mirrors so situated is a dizzying experience for viewers as they see reflections of themselves repeated endlessly before them. Again, which of the reflections is the "true" reflection? Like a mirror, or a poem, a dream seems to reveal something important to the dreamer, but its meaning is masked with image, symbol, and illusion.

Furthermore, in dreams, the dreamer sometimes engages in a relationship with another person that has no basis whatsoever in reality. Upon awakening, however, the dreamer has all the emotional feelings for the other person that a real relationship might

engender. Again, a poem may provide the same kind of response. In Wells's words, a poem of literary value allows the reader to "generalize," or apply, the emotional experience of a poem to his or her own life. Here again, however, the emotion a reader feels when reading a poem is like the emotion created in a dream; while it seems real, it is, upon analysis, a reflection of emotional content embedded in the poem by the poet. Such thinking leads to an understanding that mirrors, dreams, and poems connect readers to themselves, the poet, and the reading community. In truth, mirrors, dreams, and poems also can isolate the viewer, dreamer, or reader because each of these experiences is, in itself, a solitary one.

Akhmatova returns to the image of the mirror and dream in the second section of the poem, "First Warning." She writes that she has "lived in so many mirrors." What does it mean to live in a mirror? Surely nothing "lives" in a mirror. Akhmatova seems to suggest that she is nothing but reflection, that she is what others see. She writes a few lines later of "an eye that conceals in its depth, / In its anxious silence, / That rusty, scratchy little wreath." In these lines, she seems to be connecting the eye with the mirror. When a person looks into another's eyes, the person sees his or her own face reflected back. Yet, if a person is only a reflection of what others see, or of what she sees when she looks at the mirror, where is the core of her being? Living in a mirror, therefore, suggests not only the loss of love, but also the loss of self.

The third section of the poem also uses the image of the mirror in its title, "Through the Looking Glass." In titling this poem, Akhmatova alludes to Lewis Carroll's famous story of Alice who falls into her mirror only to find a mad world where nothing is as it seems. Biographical critics suggest that the "young beauty" in this section is one of Nikolay Punin's mistresses, as Reeder reveals in her notes to the translation of the poem.

While this may be so, it is also possible to read the "she" of the poem as the mirror itself, and by extension, the poem. When the speaker and the person to whom she speaks are together, the "beauty" does not leave them alone, just as a mirror continues to reflect the couple. Line six reveals, "I generously share my flowers with her." The mirror would "share" the flowers by reflecting them. Indeed, it would look as if the flowers were actually in the mirror itself, almost as if the speaker had given the flowers to the mirror. The mirror, then, opens the passage to an alternate reality both visible and real to the people in the room. The section closes with the telling lines. "We know something about each other, / Something horrible. We are in an infernal circle. / But perhaps, this is not us at all." The "infernal circle" is the trap of the mirror: as the couple looks into the mirror, it reflects their images back to them, and so on, and so on, to such an extent that the couple cannot at last be sure of what is the reality and what is the reflection. This "infernal circle" prevents the lovers from knowing truth; isolated as they are from truth and life, they only can see illusion and death. Likewise, the poem itself, while reflecting the image of the couple, may actually hide what it seems to reveal. After all, "perhaps this is not us at all."

As the poem continues, images of dreams become increasingly connected with isolation and death. In the fifth section of the cycle, "The Call," dream is metaphorically compared to disappearance and then to death, which is a "sacrifice to silence." It is

tempting here, as throughout "Midnight Verses" to equate this silence to the silencing of Akhmatova's own poetic voice by Stalin's regime. Certainly, for a poet, the silence of erasure (much like disappearance, for that matter) is a kind of death. It is also possible, however, to read this poem apart from the biographical detail and as a meditation on the isolation and loss that is necessarily a part of life.

In the final section, "In Place of an Epilogue," Akhmatova returns to the image of dream, although at the last possible moment, she turns the notion of "dream" away from death and loss. The place "where dreams were formed" has not stored "enough different dreams" for the "us" of the poem, resulting in the speaker and addressee seeing "the same dream." In writing about another of Akhmatova's poems, "The Wild Rose Blooms," Wells argues that "it is the function of poetry in linking past, present which is predominant." This assessment might well be applied to this final section of "Midnight Verses." Surely, the place where dreams were formed is in the past, in the early moments of a relationship between the speaker and addressee. When the two see the same dream, it must occur after the formation of the dreams and their placement in memory, in some overlapping juxtaposition of time. In the final line, in the closing breaths of the poem, Akhmatova asserts that the dream "was powerful / As spring's arrival." Thus, Akhmatova turns her recurring image away from the thick isolation and silence that has surrounded the cycle to this point, and instead links the dream with the arrival of spring, a metaphor for rebirth and ongoing life. Further, while the earlier sections of the cycle focus on separation and departure, these final lines introduce the possibility of union ("we saw the same dream") and arrival. It is as if she must herself go through the looking glass, through the dream, through the poem, to create a future that is as powerful and inevitable as spring itself, that asserts the supremacy of life over death, and of beauty over despair.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, Critical Essay on "Midnight Verses," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Driver provides historical and social contexts for Akhmatova's poetry, positioning the poet within the greater canon of Russian literature.

Anna Akhmatova occupies a position unique in the history of modern Russian poetry. An establish poet before the revolution, she continued her active creative life well into the mid-1960s, and after the death of Pasternak, Akhmatova was the last remaining major link with what had been one of the great ages of Russian poetry.

Her early career was closely associated with Acmeism, a poetic movement which defined itself in opposition to Russian symbolism, stressing craftsmanship in poetry and affirming the significance of this phenomenal world in contradistinction to the abstract "Other World" of the Symbolists. Akhmatova's early work was perceived as exemplary for the new movement, and achieved a remarkable popular and critical success. The reading public welcomed the clarity, accessibility, and almost conversational style of her brief, fragile love lyrics, especially after the mystifications and abstractions of the Symbolists. The critics recognized and appreciated Akhmatova's innovations, her technical accomplishment, and the extraordinary compactness of her verse. By the publication of her fifth book in 1922, an "Akhmatova style" in Russian poetry was widely recognized.

As a matter of conscious artistic choice, Akhmatova limited her early themes in large part to love, to poetry, and to her homeland. Settings for the predominant love theme are typically drawn from what has traditionally been thought of as the woman's world: home, interiors, garden, details of decor, and dress. Simple enough in themselves, the images evolve in sum into a complex symbolic system. The otherwise spare and laconic poems are enriched, moreover, by a matrix of images drawn from Russia's cultural history: folk motifs, the old partriarchal life, Orthodoxy, the great cities of Russia. Related to this matrix, and just below the surface of the worldly love lyrics, are the old Orthodox themes of conscience and remorse, sin and retribution, repentance and self-abnegation. It is such themes that developed in the later major works to an extraordinary power and dignity.

Although Akhmatova maintained a remarkable stylistic consistency throughout her career, it was as early as 1924 that her beloved friend and fellowpoet Mandel'shtam noted a "sharp break" in Akhmatova's work: "The voice of self-abnegation grows stronger in Akhmatova's poetry, and at present her poetry approaches becoming one of the symbols of the greatness in Russia." Mandel'shtam's words were prophetic for Akhmatova's longer works like *Rekviem* (*Requiem*), *Poema bez geroia* (*Poem without a Hero*), and the "Northern Elegies."

In the dark years of official disfavour and persecution that followed her former husband's execution, Akhmatova continued to write, but except for a brief respite during World War II she was not permitted to publish any original poetry. Many of her poems were lost in those tragic years; during the worst of them, many were burned by the poet herself. For

a long time, Akhmatova did not dare even to set new poems to paper: the more important ones were committed to memory by her friends and thus preserved.

As works from this period began to appear in the 1950s, it was clear that Akhmatova had undergone an amazing growth and development. The poet emerges as a preserver and continuator of a poetic culture older and broader than the one of her current reality. In the longer works, the poet stands also as conscience and judge for a society suffering under the cataclysms of wars and revolution. *Requiem* is an epic lament for a Russia in the grip of Stalinist Terror. *Poem without a Hero* is a retrospective of Akhmatova's own world from Petersburg in 1913 to the nightmare of World War II and beyond. It is her judgement on an age and also her retribution for her own suffering. By the time she added the last touches to the poem in 1962, Akhmatova had become for Russian poetry the very symbol of moral rectitude and artistic integrity in the face of intolerable personal hardship and official persecution. Along with some of the shorter poems, these masterworks stand as tribute to one of the great Russian poets of the 20th century.

Source: Sam Driver, "Akhmatova, Anna," in *Reference Guide to World Literature*, 3d ed., edited by Sara Pendergast and Tom Pendergast, Vol. 1, St. James Press, 2003, pp. 14-16.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Perloff lauds Akhmatova as a standout female poet who resisted the force of history and the pressure of gender expectations from interfering with her work.

[*The Complete Poems of Anna Akhamatova*], a bilingual edition, with extraordinary notes, biographies, photographs, illustrations, and facsimile pages, would be a bargain at twice the price. The poems themselves, of which more in a moment, are framed, in Volume I, by a Translator's Preface, in which Judith Hemschemeyer, herself a poet, provides valuable comments on Akhamatova's prosody and stylistic habits, and by the editor Roberta Reeder's 160-page critical biography of the poet, which could easily have been published as a separate book. Then in Volume II, there are further biographical memoirs, this time by Isaiah Berlin and by Akhamatova's protégé, the critic Anatoly Naiman. At the back of Volume II, following a group of 200 uncollected lyrics (some of Akhmatova's most brilliant poems, reproduced from V. M. Zhirmunsky's 1976 Leningrad edition), there are detailed and scholarly notes on the poem and a full bibliography. The production job (the arrangement is chronological, the Russian on facing pages, with the fascinating photographs, lithographs, and drawings giving a very full picture of Akhamatova and her circle from childhood to old age, interspersed throughout) seems to me quite simply stunning.

For some reason, Akhamatova's poetry had never really penetrated my consciousness as had Khlebnikov's or Mayakovsky's or Pasternak's. I knew English versions of some of her famous poems like "I Visited a Poet . . ." (to Alexander Blok) and "The Tale of the Black Ring," but found her seemingly straightforward lyrics on love and sorrow and death too direct and "simple" to have the appeal that, say, Khlebnikov's complicated linguistic experiments had for me. But reading Akhamatova in these new translations (on the whole, *excellent* in capturing the poems' visual layout, tone, and sound quality□at least so it seems to a novice in the Russian language like me), in the light of Reeder's fascinating account of the poet's life had made me a total convert.

Akhamatova's poetry uses very little figuration; it is primarily heightened natural speech presented in straightforward syntax in the rhythms of folk song and *dolnik* (a poem with a fixed number of syllables, usually with a complicated rhyme scheme and echolalia). But, like Goethe's lyric, which it very much resembles, Akhamatova's is *occasional* poetry whose strength lies in capturing, by means of delicate verbal adjustments, the exact emotion of a particular moment. Here is a poem of 1915, dedicated to the critic and connoisseur N. V. Nedobrovo, a man with whom Akhamatova shared a great deal but with whom she was not in love:

There is a sacred boundary between those who
are close,
And it cannot be crossed by passion or love□
Though lips fuse in dreadful silence
And the heart shatters to pieces with love.

Friendship is helpless here, and years
Of exalted and ardent happiness,
When the soul is free and a stranger
To the slow languor of voluptuousness.

Those who strive to reach it are mad, and those
Who reach it□stricken by grief . . .
Now you understand why my heart
Does not beat faster under your hand.

If the English version cannot quite capture the rhythmic quality of the original, with its intricately sounded four-stress lines and prominent rhymes (*strasti* / *chasti; toskoio* / *rukoio*), it does convey the poet's startling admission that for her, love is not based on psychological or emotional communion but on "the slow languor of voluptuousness," that without that "slow languor," "my heart / Does not beat faster under your hand." this last phrase seems almost hackneyed until we stop to consider what it really means. For the poet is not making the standard Romantic speech about her inability to re- turn her lover's passion; she is not gently but firmly refusing his suit. On the contrary, it is while she is letting him caress her breasts and having sex with him, that she tells this close friend and ardent lover that he just doesn't turn her on.

There is a cruel, almost a brutal element in such confession, and indeed one begins to see Akhamatova as anything but the "domestic" poet (Trotsky witheringly dismissed her as a "doctor of female ailments"), she is often taken to be. Her love poems (and her best poems *are* love poems) run the gamut from self-abasement to intense erotic satisfaction, from contempt for a husband to pity for a former lover and shyness in the face of a new encounter, from *schadenfreude* at the defeat of rival to total despair at the rejection by a new love object. Indeed, the force and violence of the poet's response to the passions leads me to a second observation.

Akhamatova's lyric is animated by an assumption that goes counter to all current feminist talk of victimization at the hands of the partriarchy, of the second-class status of women, and so on. That assumption is that a woman can be as strong and powerful as any man. Akhamatova let nothing interfere with her work, a work she refused to distinguish from life, and especially from sexual love□neither marriage (a bond under which she chafed and repeatedly dissolved) nor motherhood (she left her only child Lev in the country to be brought up by relatives), nor the extreme poverty and deprivation that came after the Revolution, nor the censorship of her work under Stalin. When World War II broke out, she gave radio speeches, mobilizing the women in Leningrad. The poet Olga Beggolts recalls, "With a face severe and angry, a gas mask thrown over her shoulder, she took on the fire watch like a regular soldier. She sewed bags for sand which were put on the trenches." If she was not a "good" mother in her youth, she spent endless hours of her maturity trying to free her son, a prominent scholar, from arrest and exile, going so far as to write verses to Stalin so as to plead Lev's cause. Her efforts on behalf of her imprisoned friend Osip Mandelstam are legendary. In the fifties, during the

final decade of her life, when she was ousted from the Union of Soviet Writers, she earned her living translating the works of Serbian, Armenian, and Ukranian authors.

At a time when many of our own poets and artists are so obsessed by the NEA debacle that they seem to have forgotten why they became poets in the first place, Anna Akhamatova provides the most luminous example imaginable of *what can be done*. And further: at a time when the "woman artist" is too often represented as a Camille Claudel (the title of a recent film), who must choose between "art" and "love," it is refreshing to witness Akhamatova's life-long conviction that she had to have both and that one fed the other. Indeed, if one reads straight through from *Evening* (1912), published when Akhamatova was only twenty-three, to the lyrics of the sixties collected in *Seventh Book*, the image that emerges is of a powerful woman to whom every turn presents a formidable roadblock but who not only survives but triumphs. A highly improbably tale for the twentieth century and hence doubly rewarding.

Source: Marjorie Perloff, Review of *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, in *Sulfur*, Vol. 11, No. 27, Fall 1990, 1990, pp. 233-237.

Adaptations

A video about the poet's life, *The Personal File of Anna Akhmatova*, is based on her diaries and the memoirs of Lidiya Chukovskaya. It was produced in Russian by Semyon Aranovitch in 1989 and adapted to English by Maryna Albert in 1991. It is in Russian with English subtitles and is available from the Video Project division of Act Now Productions.

In 1998, Akhmatova's poetry was adapted to a stage play called *The Akhmatova Project*, created and directed by Nancy Keystone. The Critical Mass Theatre Company of UCLA staged the project. The play's web site at http://www .akhmatovaproject.com/page2.html provides full background and links to web sites consulted.

Topics for Further Study

Research the Acmeists, the literary group that Akhmatova helped to found when she was young, and show how a modern poem fits or does not fit the Acmeists' theories.

The section "The Visit at Night" refers to someone who has gone, who has returned to the poem's speaker through a Vivaldi adagio. Listen to a piece by Vivaldi while taking notes, and then write a short sketch of the person that it makes you think of.

Choose the lyrics for a piece of music that you like, then write a dedication and an epilogue to go along with it.

Choose one of these seven poems to represent in a painting or drawing, or go out with a camera and photograph some scene that you feel would be an appropriate portrayal of one of these poems.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: The Soviet Union and the United States are competitors for the allegiance of smaller countries around the world. The "Cold War" between them is most evident in the civil war in Vietnam, where the Northern Communists are backed by the Soviets and the South is supported by the United States.

Today: The United States is the one remaining superpower. The Soviet Union disbanded in 1991, and most of its countries have adapted capitalist economies.

1960s: Writers in the Soviet Union live in fear that they will be punished for writing things that the government finds inappropriate. In 1964, for instance, influential Russian poet Joseph Brodsky is sentenced to five years of hard labor for writing "gibberish."

Today: Russian writers openly participate in the international literary scene without fear of reprisal.

1960s: The Soviet Union revels in its technological superiority, having sent the first manmade satellite into space in 1957. Americans, having been surprised by the satellite's existence, struggle to gain superiority in the space race by working to put a man on the moon.

Today: Technology from the former Soviet countries is generally considered backwards, hampered by government policies that stressed political subservience over success.

1960s: American cities are torn apart by protests and race riots, as black Americans, tired of waiting for the equality promised a hundred years ago at the end of the Civil War, lash out.

Today: Ethnic tensions create violent situations in many former Soviet Union countries, as various ethnic groups that were forced to live together by the Soviets lash out against those whom they see as intruders.

What Do I Read Next?

All of Akhmatova's poems are available in one exhaustively researched volume, *The Collected Poems of Anna Akhmatova*. The expanded edition, published by Zephyr Press in 1998, was translated by Judith Hemschemeyer and includes notes by Roberta Reeder and a memoir by Akhmatova's friend Isaiah Berlin.

One of the most comprehensive biographies of Akhmatova is Roberta Reeder's *Anna Akhmatova: Poet and Prophet*, published in 1994 by St. Martin's Press.

The poetry of Akhmatova's mentor and first husband, Nicholas Gumilyov, is available for the first time in decades in the collection *The Pillar of Fire: Selected Poems* (1999), translated by Richard McKane and published by Anvil Press.

The epigraph from "Elegy Before the Coming of Spring" comes from French poet Gérard de Nerval's poem "El Desdichado." A selection of the stories, essays, and poetry of Nerval, who has been compared to the novelist Marcel Proust, is available in *Selected Writings* (1999), published by Penguin.

Akhmatova wrote openly about her life in the essays collected in *My Half Century: Collected Prose* (1992), published by Ardis Publishers. The book includes diary entries and sketches of other writers.

Further Study

Amert, Susan, *In a Shattered Mirror: The Later Poetry of Anna Akhmatova*, Stanford University Press, 1992.

A book-length examination of the poetry that Akhmatova produced in the 1950s and 1960s and the ways in which her personal struggles may have influenced it. Amert presents much of the poetry in Russian alongside English translations.

Doherty, Justin, *The Acmeist Movement in Russian Poetry*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

The first major examination in English of the acmeist movement, this book examines not only the three principle figures (Akhmatova, Gumilyov, and Mandelshtam), but also the minor poets who were their followers.

Haight, Amanda, "1956-1966," in *Akhmatova: A Poetic Pilgrimage*, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 165-97.

Haight, a leading Akhmatova scholar, examines the poet's later years and, in particular, possible inspirations for "Midnight Verses."

Ivanov, Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich, "Meetings with Akhmatova," in *Anna Akhmatova and Her Circle*, compiled with notes by Konstantin Polivanov, translated from the Russian by Patricia Berozkina, University of Arkansas Press, 1994, pp. 198-214.

Ivanov's acquaintance with the poet lasted from 1958 to her death in 1966. This essay gives a sense of her life late in her career, when "Midnight Verses" was being written.

Nayman, Anatoly, *Remembering Anna Akhmatova*, translated from the Russian by Wendy Rosslyn, Henry Holt, 1989.

An old friend recalls his years of association with Akhmatova and with others of their literary circle.

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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.

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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