The Milkfish Gatherers Study Guide

The Milkfish Gatherers by James Fenton

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Introduction

"The Milkfish Gatherers" appears in Fenton's 1994 collection *Out of Danger*. The poem is an example of New Formalism or poetry that has returned to the roots of more traditional English verse forms. Fenton, a British poet, takes W. H. Auden as a mentor for form but moves his own verse further into the realm of the social and political world. "The Milkfish Gatherers" is a more recent work, coming late in the poet's career. The poem makes use of Fenton's geographical wanderings and comments on the political and social history of the Philippines. On a metaphorical level, the poem is also a commentary on the state of contemporary poetry.

"The Milkfish Gatherers" tells the story of fishermen in Manila during the Philippines' century-long fight for political independence, which began when the country was ruled by Spain in the 1800s and continues to this day. The poem is about the revolutionary idea: how it is born, how it dwindles, and the hope of its return. At hopeful points, the poem anticipates a new future but settles at the end into the waiting time before the dormant revolution awakens. In the latter part of the poem, the Filipino story becomes a human story. The revolution becomes humanity's struggle to retain things of value, maintain dignity, and cultivate dreams of the future. The poem is also an example of an *ars poetica,* or a poem about the writing of poetry. In this way, the poem can be read as an extended metaphor. The fishermen are like poets, casting their lines, poetic lines, in an attempt to write something of value. The revolution, then, is one of language. The speaker muses about the current world of the contemporary poet; how the fish or the poems are milkfish or, in other words, nothing much.

Fenton's travels and experiences outside of his life as a poet give him a broad terrain in which to roam. This poem is representative of many of his works that take possession of alien subject matter—other cultures and the lives of people that encompass those cultures—and allow the alienation to be absorbed and formed into a more universal story.

Author Biography

Fenton was born in 1949 in Lincoln, England, to Mary Hamilton Ingoldby Fenton and John Charles Fenton, an Anglican priest. At the age of nine, Fenton was sent to musical preparatory school, then on to Repton Public School in Derbyshire, before entering Magdalen College in Oxford in 1967. Fenton began his stay at Oxford studying English with the poet John Fuller, who became his mentor and friend. But the life of a poet had little professional appeal to Fenton, who switched to a course of study of philosophy, psychology, and physiology—the three Ps. He believed he wanted to be an anthropologist. A school friend from those early days recalls that Fenton said he wanted a job like anyone else because one couldn't just be a poet. Fenton's pull to poetry began when he read "About this House," W. H. Auden's collection of verse. Fenton met Auden at a reading Auden gave at Fenton's school. A minor friendship between the two lasted until Auden's death in 1973.

When his mentor died in 1973, Fenton was already well on his way to establishing himself as a poet. In 1968, his first year at Oxford, he won the Newdigate Prize for the best poem by an undergraduate. The poem was a sonnet sequence called "Western Furniture," which chronicled the opening of Japan to Western culture. The poem was broadcast on British radio through the BBC and published in pamphlet form by his friend Fuller. As he was finishing "Western Furniture," Fenton had the urge to experiment with language and form. The resulting poems were interesting failures, but they contributed to Fenton's later vocabulary and tone.

In 1970, Fenton graduated Oxford and began his professional career as a freelance writer of literary reviews. By 1972, he had finished his first full-length collection of work titled *Terminal Moraine,* which won the Gregory Award. Fenton used his prize money to travel to Cambodia and Vietnam, beginning a wanderlust that has lasted a lifetime. In the latter 1970s, Fenton's career spanned several journalistic pursuits, first as the political correspondent for *New Statesman,* then as the German correspondent for *The Guardian,* and, finally, as the theater critic for the *London Sunday Times,* a position he still holds.

Poem Text

The sea sounds insincere
Giving and taking with one hand.
It stopped a river here last month
Filling its mouth with sand.They drag the shallows for the milkfish fry—
Two eyes on a glass noodle, nothing more.
Roused by his viligant young wife
The drowsy stevedoreComes running barefoot past the swamp
To meet a load of wood.
The yellow peaked cap, the patched pink shorts
Seem to be all his worldly goods.The nipa booths along the coast
Protect the milkfish gatherers' rights.
Nothing goes unobserved. My good custodian
Sprawls in the deckchair through the night.Take care, he says, take care—
Not everybody is a friend.
And so he makes my life more private still—
A privacy on which he will attend.But the dogs are sly with the garbage
And the cats ruthless, even with sliced bread,
As the terns are ruthless among the shoals.
Men watch the terns, then give the boat its headDragging a wide arc through the blue,
Trailing their lines,
Cutting the engine out
At the first sign.A hundred feet away
Something of value struggles not to die.
It will sell for a dollar a kilo.
It weighs two kilos on the line—a prize.And the hull fills with a fortune
And the improbable colours of the sea
But the spine lives when the brain dies
In a convulsive misery.Rummagers of inlets, scourers of the deep,
Dynamite men, their bottles crammed with wicks,
They named the sea's inhabitants with style—
The slapped vagina fish, the horse's dick.Polillo 'melts' means it is far away—
The smoking island plumed from slash and burn.
And from its shore, busy with hermit crabs,
Look to Luzon. Infanta melts in turn.The setting sun behind the Sierra Madre
Projects a sharp blue line across the sky
And in the eastern glow beyond Polillo
It looks as if another sun might rise—As if there were no night,
Only a brother evening and a dawn.
No night! No death! How could these people live?
How could the pressure lanterns lure the prawns?Nothing of value has arrived all day—
No timber, no rattan. Now after dark,
The news comes from the sea. They crowd the beach
And prime a lantern, waiting for the shark.The young receive the gills, which they will

cook.
The massive liver wallows on the shore
And the shark's teeth look like a row of sharks
Advancing along a jaw.Alone again by spirit light
I notice something happening on a post.
Something has burst its skin and now it hangs,
Hangs for dear life onto its fine brown ghost.Clinging exhausted to its former self,
Its head flung back as if to watch the moon,
The blue-green veins pulsing along its wings,
The thing unwraps itself, but falls too soon.The ants are tiny and their work is swift—
The insect-shark is washed up on their land—
While the sea sounds insincere,
Giving and taking with one hand.At dawn along the seashore come
The milkfish gatherers, human fry.
A white polythene bowl
Is what you need to sort the milkfish by.For a hatched fish is a pair of eyes—
There is nothing more to see.
But the spine lives when the brain dies
In a convulsive misery.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4:

In this opening stanza, Fenton personifies the sea, allowing it to take on human characteristics. The sea "sounds insincere," sets an ominous tone for the poem. The word "insincere," coupled with its "giving" and "taking," prompts caution and distrust. It is a source of destruction, stopping the flow of the river. The physical setting of the poem is a place where the sea is unpredictable and unfriendly. If the poem is read as a metaphor for the writing and reception of poetry in contemporary times, the sea could be a raft of critics or a fickle audience giving and taking praise on a whim. This kind of sea stops a flow of descent literature, the "river," and fills the "mouth" of the poet "with sand." The sand prevents the art of poetry, reducing it to mediocrity.

Lines 5-8:

In this stanza, Fenton continues to build the scene. The reader is uncertain who "they" is. "They" might be fishermen or scroungers, dragging the sea for some gem of nourishment. They are trying to catch the milkfish, who lurk in the shallows. Milkfish are food fish found in the tropical Pacific and Indian Oceans. Fenton places the poem in the tropics. Later he will tell us that he is near Luzon, which is a city in the Philippines. The poem glosses the Filipino quest for independence, which has lasted from 1872 until the present time. In this quest, revolutionaries have been spied upon and killed. The fish that "they," the revolutionaries, are trying to catch are the different ideas of revolution. In this scenario, the revolutionary ideas available to "them" are toothless, bony fishes that look like "two eyes on a glass noodle," in other words, nothing much. If "they," the fisherman, were poets in the contemporary scene, they would be fishing for poems. The metaphor states that the poems being fished for are found in the shallows; they are a product of the shoals, toothless and bony. The current poems are, in other words, nothing much. At the end of the stanza, Fenton introduces people to this scene, a longshoreman and his wife. This "stevedore" is "drowsy" presumably from hard, thankless work, the work of the want-to-be revolutionary that doesn't know how to revolutionize.

Lines 9-12:

The stevedore, the want-to-be revolutionary/ poet, is flushed out in this stanza. He is poor, running to "meet a load of wood," making a living. What he is wearing seems to be all "his worldly goods." Here, the speaker assesses him and almost seems to admire his poverty as an honest way to make a living in a political climate that does not breed integrity. Even in his oppressed state, there is something still bright about him in his hat and pink shorts, a subdued energy.

Lines 13-16:

In this stanza, the speaker becomes cynical. He talks about the "milkfish gatherers' rights," when, in fact, they seem to have no special rights but to scrounge and scurry in the shallows. The ominous tone returns to the poem with the acknowledgement that "nothing goes unobserved." There are no secrets on this shore. The speaker comments on the political scene in the Philippines, the putting down of the people during a century of struggle, the oppression of the "milkfish gatherers" who have nothing left to forfeit. The fact that nothing goes unobserved suggests that everyone is being watched and accused. The speaker has a watchdog, a political friend, who sits by him all night long during the darkest times. The "friend" is his protector. For the speaker as poet, nothing goes unobserved either. The poet is observed by history, a lineage of poets who have come before him. But who is the poet's guardian and protector? Fenton's guardians in the poetic world are his British forefathers, Auden and Philip Larkin. The poet's guardians are also his mentors, who can inadvertently hinder growth by protecting too much, dissuading the revolution of language with their safe and proven formulas.

Lines 17-20:

In this stanza, the guardian tells the speaker to "take care," that "not everyone is a friend." The speaker muses about this and becomes discouraged; by being cautious of everyone and everything, his life becomes lonelier. The political revolutionary has no friends and trusts no one. To take care is good advice for the poet as well, who is in danger of losing himself to the viciousness of the business of poetry, the past glories, and the push toward the commercial. To be set apart, for the poet, as well as for the revolutionary, is also the making of loneliness. The guardians, the poets with their big reputations and styles and voices are restrictive as well as protective to the poet. Their voices are the ones that will push the speaker into himself, into the private rather than the public world.

Lines 21-24:

This stanza transitions away from the people of the poem to a completely different scene. The conjunction "but" suggests that the animals in this stanza are connected to the previous stanzas, but how? The dogs, cats, and terns, each in their own turn act ruthlessly and slyly. It's as if they are spies wearing masks. The traits of the sea are now absorbed by these creatures. As the terns move among the shallows, they show the fishermen where to catch those easy milkfish. The men must calculate according to what the terns tell them to do if they are going to catch anything. The revolutionaries watch the big politicos much as the fishermen watch the terns. The fisherman is also the poet watching the turns (or "terns") of the audience, watching for anything that may point to some success. The terns as an audience tells the poet where to fish to get something that they, the audience, will eat. The audience, in other words, dictates the art. If the audience stays in the shallows, the art will too. The speaker eases up on the

artist, seeing the artist as the one who is dictated to. If the art is shallow, it is because that is what the people want.

Lines 25-28:

Here the fishermen act out fishing. They drag their lines until there is some activity, then cut the engines when they see something move so as not to scare the fish away. They are cautious fishermen much as the revolutionaries must be cautious so as not to draw attention to themselves. The speaker implies that the contemporary poet also follows the fishermen's moves. The poet drags his poetic line, which can be quite beautiful as "a wide arch through the blue," but cuts the rhythm and momentum of the poem, its engine, when he sees the first sign that it may be eliciting some reaction from the public. The contemporary poet doesn't want to scare his audience away.

Lines 29-32:

This stanza talks about the big fish, not the milkfish but the salmon that is caught in deep water; it is valuable and will fetch "a dollar a kilo," "a prize." The big fish is struggling not to die; but it will. The big fish for the Filipinos is the big revolutionary, the leader who carried within himself the big, valuable vision of a political future. In 1872, the idea of a revolution was first birthed. The revolution would die and come to life many times before being successful with the fall of Marcos. The poem implies that there is not a revolutionary capable of victory in the present circumstance. The big fish is also the vast, deep, and truly poetic poem. This rare and beautiful creature will fetch a lot, because there simply aren't a lot of rare and beautiful poems with big, epic, poetic visions. This kind of poem will flourish and die many times; it will die for lack of an audience and lack of poets who can write such poems.

Lines 33-36:

This stanza talks about making it big when the "improbable colours of the sea" fill up your boat and make you a fortune. For the revolutionary, it is going halfway, making a good show of revolution without committing all the way. For the poet, it means selling-out, shocking with language to make the big buck. The "improbable colours" for the poet are flashes in the pan, pretty trinkets without the gold—facades. This stanza marks the first time the poem's gutsy refrain appears. "The spine lives when the brain dies / In a convulsive misery." The line implies that the thing of value that was struggling in the previous stanza has died. The revolutionary ideal and the new fresh poetic voice have expired. The will for revolution has not died, but the means by which to make the vision real have passed for now. The line suggests for poetry that the will to write well thrives in the contemporary world, but the intelligence by which to write the revolutionary poem has dissipated.

Lines 37-40:

In this stanza, the speaker introduces the Adams, the first namers of things, the people who took dares and risked danger to explore the world and name the things they found. These were magic people, "rummagers" who weren't afraid to get dirty, "scourers" who weren't afraid to get lost, and "dynamite men" who risked everything. Politically, these true historical revolutionaries are gone from the coast. There is only the stevedore and his wife running to fetch and carry. There are only people left to distrust. There are no risk takers or revolutionaries. This is suggestive of poetry as well. Here there are no Audens or poets like T. S. Eliot stretching the language, naming things through verse. The poet and the audience have become complacent, dictating each other's mediocrity. The magicians have vanished.

Lines 41-44:

The introduction of a foreign word into this stanza is the speaker's attempt to be a dynamite man, to stretch the language, to define and engage it. It is also a daring political act. The smoking island "plumed from slash and burn" connotes the mountain of garbage, Smokey Mountain, that burned in Manila during the reign of Marcos. The burning garbage is, indeed, a sign of the Marcos regime, a time and place of rot, death, and decay. Humanity's tendencies toward self-destruction are prevalent in this stanza. The little scavengers, the "hermit crabs," are left the scraps of this destruction, the fruits of the halfway revolution. The poet is also only left scraps. If art is a reflection of society, then humanity's various modes of self-destruction kill the poet as humanity kills itself.

Lines 45-48:

The poem shifts to Mexico, here, and the mountain ranges of the Sierre Madre. In the 1800s, the Philippines were ruled by Spain but governed from Mexico. By crossing the world geographically, the poem tells the history of the Philippines. This geographical disembodiment also makes the poem a more universal object. The setting sun suggests an end to the political regime and injects hope into the scene. The sun that "projects a sharp blue line" across the sky is vibrant and hints that something fresh and new is returning, the poet's blue lines from line 25. The other sun that might rise is also a sign of hope. It is a precarious hope framed in an "as if" statement but a hope nonetheless. For the poet, this suggests that poetry is not dead, but that a new voice is on the horizon, a revitalizing voice, a vibrant new vision.

Lines 49-52:

The cycle of death, destruction, and resurrection appears in this stanza. The speaker cannot imagine a world in which there was always light and no darkness. The speaker implies there is a time and place for both, that this is the cycle of life. The current time is still dark and full of destruction, but the light will come. This is also the speaker's

rumination about the creative process, its low and high points. There can't always be sunlight. The "pressure lanterns luring the prawns" can only lure the delicacies of the deep. The light must come from the dark. The prawn, the thing of value, must be lured from darkness. The prawn is the successful revolution that must be birthed in the dark times and lured into the light. Translated to the realm of poetry; there can be no renaissance without the dark ages. A new, vital poetry is birthed in ruble. The sea can take, but at some point the tide will turn, and it will give again.

Lines 53-56:

The poem returns to the dark ages in this stanza. A glimpse was seen of the future world, but the current world is the one they live in, and in this world "nothing of value has arrived all day." For the stevedore, this is bad news. For the speaker, it is bad news. But this return to the bleakest of realities is short-lived. A shark is washed up on the shore. This something of value arrives, and the people rush to it and are hungry for it. It is lured by a lantern, which is a small light. For the revolutionary, a small victory begins the quest for the larger victory. Each small victory is a light illuminating the path to success. For the poet and the revolution, the dark ages are still real, but every once in a while something of value arrives on the scene—an idea or poetic vision that is worth looking at. That something of value is greeted warmly by an audience; that is also an act of hope. The poem is a small light in the dark world.

Lines 57-60:

In this stanza everyone is fed. Each person on the shore takes something home to eat. For the Filipino people, the small light was, perhaps, the beginning of the Cuban-American skirmish in 1898. It was this war that resulted in a short-lived Filipino freedom before the country was plunged into the darkness of dictatorship again. The people had a taste of what could be, and it was enough for everyone. This is true of a good poem as well. A good poem carries within it something for everyone. This shark, the good poem in a dark time, is aggressive; it has sharp teeth and foretells more sharp teeth. The "rows of sharks advancing along a jaw," predict a string of valuable poems, a string of mini-revolutions, and a gradual return to better literary and political times.

Lines 61-64:

In this stanza, the speaker is alone again. The brief gathering of community, the brief return of trust and value, has dissipated. The speaker is "alone by spirit light," alone in his own vast world. If the shark was a thing of value for the whole community, what the speaker witnesses in this stanza is a thing of value for himself. This "real" vision, this valuable thing is the impetus for living, a fragile and precarious living. The thing bursting its skin is the idea of the revolution, the glimpse of the new life. It is the private vision, one that must be in place before the public revolution can occur. For the poet, the thing

bursting its skin is the poet's own voice being discovered. If the previous stanza was about poetry for all, this stanza is about poetry for one, the public versus the private.

Lines 65-68:

In this stanza, there is a birth of something rare, vital, and fragile. It is a revolution for the speaker, a feast of senses in the "blue-green veins pulsing." The creature has wings by which to fly, but "falls too soon." It is not its time. The stanza suggests that the revolution is a highbred creature that has come too soon into the world. The people are not ready to receive it. This is also true for poetry. The new voice of poetry comes too soon and fades away again before returning stronger. Getting rid of former, stagnant selves is not easy. The stanza suggests that sometimes that isn't all bad. If the world clings to a former self, then perhaps it is not time to give it up.

Lines 69-72:

In this stanza, the new thing, the insect-shark, the new poetry, the revolution is cleaned up and tossed out. Any evidence that the new creature existed is carried away by "ants." The alien being, the revolution, is too alien yet to be welcomed into the world of the human. The beginning line returns, the sea again sounding "insincere." The big politicos have sentenced the revolution to death. The critics have sentenced the "insect-shark," a new form and voice in poetry, to death.

Lines 73-76:

In this stanza, the milkfish gatherers become "human fry." It is ultimately up to them to sort the good fish from the bad. They are the worker bees, the ones left to sort out all the political fussing, the good political moves from the bad. The audience and the poet himself are also "human fry," left to sort the good poems from the bad poems. Only a few are worth all the effort, the revolutionary ones.

Lines 77-80:

In this final stanza, the milkfish is dissected and discovered to be just a pair of eyes, the current state of politics, just show, no substance. The contemporary poem is just a shocking image and nothing more. If we stretch the image of the eyes, we can speculate that the "eyes" are also Is and that the speaker is commenting on the trend of political leaders to serve for their own selfish reasons such as Marcos and his regime and the Spanish and Japanese that came before him. The Is also comment about current trends of confessional and selfindulgent poetry. These two Is or "eyes" carry out a shallow conversation with themselves. The refrain returns at the end to reiterate the will or the spine's determination to revolt and embrace the "insect-shark" or the new life. It is a life of poetry as well. The revolution of politics and the revolution of linguistics lack, at this point, the intelligence to execute the will's desire. This is the "convulsive

misery," knowing what is missing in the world but not having the talent or tools to make it appear.

Themes

Alien Lands

In "The Milkfish Gatherers," the reader is tossed into an alien land. The placeholders, the "milkfish" and "Luzon," identify the setting as the Philippines at the time of political upheaval. Readers must know a bit about Filipino history or the poem is geographically disembodying, because when the readers are tossed to Mexico with the appearance of the Sierre Madre, they wonder where they are. Spain ruled the Philippines, but it was governed from Mexico until 1872, when the fight for Filipino independence began, a fight that continues to this day. Along the way, the zest and desire for revolution has died and been resurrected many times. The poet's own extraordinary travels and involvement with Filipino history allow the poem a broad terrain over which to roam. The confusion of setting also serves as a tool for universalizing the poem. Because every land has been privy to revolution at some time, and every person has felt the birth and death of the revolutionary idea, the place begins to matter very little as the scene of the action. Every person becomes a fisherman scouring the shallows, trying to survive and thrive in his or her own climate. The alien land becomes familiar. The alien territory of the poem becomes accessible.

Poetry as Revolution

The revolutionary setting of the poem, fraught with struggle and blooming and fading ideas of future lives after political victory, is a vast metaphor for the current and ongoing revolution of the poem. This poem is about war, but this poem is also about poetry's continual fight for metamorphosis. The creative process blooms and fades. Poetry's history has dark ages and ages of renaissance. Sometimes the "new" poetry arrives too soon, when the world is not yet ready to receive it. It becomes the insectshark dying on the line having burst its skin too soon. And poetry goes through ages of history when the will to write is present but the intelligence and point of view is not. Fenton is actually the product of the end of one of these dark ages. In the eighties, the British lacked a poet laureate, a grandfather for the important British poetic tradition. Auden, who had died in 1973, left no worthy heir. Fenton was just coming through the ranks then, making small poems of light that have helped lead the current British poetic revolution. "The Milkfish Gatherers" then is a commentary on Fenton's knowledge of Filipino history on one level and the poem's history of revolution on another.

Private versus Public

"The Milkfish Gatherers" explores the realms of the public and private as it pertains to the making and absorption of poetry. The poem, ultimately, is a public thing. The only way it is a success is if it has an audience. "The Milkfish Gatherers" suggests that the successful poem thrives on many levels. It is the shark-insect or the valuable thing of

the deep and private world: this is the poetic process. It is also the shark on the line, the thing dissected by the public, ravaged for its parts by the voracious reading masses.

This poem is a poem that is literally in the world, all over the world. It is public by function of language as well. The point of view, third person, creates a more universal aspect to the poem, which helps it avoid the confessional. A reader could easily miss the *ars poetica* all together. This poem could simply be a poem about the desire of Filipino revolution on the seashore of Manila, and how that translates to other revolutionary times for people all over the world. But the poem speaks on all kinds of levels. It speaks to the environmentalist who protests slash and burn agricultural practices. It speaks to advocates of the poor and hungry. It speaks to proponents of communal living. It divides itself out to the masses, hands out its liver and gills. The poem, though, is also a private thing. It is the "insect-shark" hanging from the fishing line observed by spirit light. It is vulnerable and inside the body with "blue-green veins." The act of making the poem, which is also a function of reading, is then also a very private endeavor.

Dark versus Light

Besides the obvious correlation of darkness with evil and light with good, the dark and light imagery in "The Milkfish Gatherers" offers many plays on these classic figures of language. The colors of the stevedore's clothes, the "yellow peaked cap" and "patched pink shorts," offer their own sense of light. The stevedore is the future revolutionary. These clothes may be all his worldly goods, but he has the light on his side. The light is also a destructive force. The island burns, and the "sharp blue line across the sky," which is a thing of light and future life, also connotes pain. New life cuts and stings.

As the old sun sets and a new sun rises, the reader feels the old cliché, an apt one for the death of an old regime and the rising of a new democratic agency. The dark is a time of destruction, the light of rebirth. The speaker states, "No night!—How could these people live?" Everyone is, as a part of humanity an equal shareholder in the darkness and the light. The "pressure lanterns lure the prawns." In other words, a small light is how the revolution begins. And the revolution is a prawn, something valuable and meaty that comes from dark times. The "spirit light" is another small light. Where the pressure lanterns lure many, it is by the spirit light that individuals find it in themselves to join the revolutionary masses. If the masses are not ready, the premature idea of revolution dies by moonlight, a faint light. In the following dawn, life returns to normal as the people continue to sort through the "milkfish" or the political propaganda once again. A new and possible dawn of revolution is implied though never experienced in the poem. But one feels it is coming as the insect-shark, following the light, willing the sunrise to hurry.

Style

Rhyming Quatrains

"The Milkfish Gatherers" is written in quatrains, end-rhymed perfectly in lines two and four of each stanza. This verse form is the most popular in English poetry. Rhymes articulate a resonance among vowels or words that seem to echo previous vowels or words. This echoing results in a pattern of aural effects. The rhyming of lines two and four lulls the poem as if at sea. Later, the first line will repeat, heightening the wave effect. Rhyme probably began as a device to aid memory, hence, nursery rhymes or stories meant to teach children lessons by drilling them into their heads. In this same vein, rhyme used in chants and protests has the power to stick with people and aid revolution. This sentiment echoes the content of "The Milkfish Gatherers." The revolution needs a song.

Refrain

The repetition of the first line of the poem later in the narrative along with the line "But the spine lives when the brain dies / In a convulsive misery" is called a *refrain*. The word refrain is derived from the Latin *refrangere,* "to break." The refrain is a line that is broken off from the main part of the poem and keeps coming back. The refrain also breaks the way a wave breaks, echoing the idea of the sea once again.

Alliteration

Alliteration begins "The Milkfish Gatherers" with "The sea sounds insincere." The repetition of consonant sounds, the s, heightens the sinister sense of the poem. Alliteration is one of the principal devices of melopoeia, which is the aural and musical quality of language. The s is used most repetitively in "The Milkfish Gatherers" to draw attention to "the setting sun behind the Sierra Madre" and the insect-shark "bursting its skin." The s is the sizzle of the sun hitting dusk's dew and the blood sliding from the veins of the highbred creature. Alliteration adds texture to the text and is invaluable in setting the scene.

Historical Context

"The Snap Revolution," which appears in a 1986 edition of the journalistic magazine, Granta, chronicles Fenton's time in the Philippines as the Marcos regime fell from power. "The Milkfish Gatherers" was spawned during Fenton's time in the Philippines, but the poem tells a larger story than the fall of one regime. The Marcos regime was an oppressive dictatorship that was the last in a long line of oppressive dictatorships for the small country. "The Milkfish Gatherers" tells, in capsule, the entire history of Filipino revolution, which began as far back as 1872 and continues to this day as the country cleans up its political system and makes way for the highbred, the "insect-shark" of the poem, or the truly free and revolutionized democratic life.

In the 1800s, the Philippines were ruled by Spain, but governed from Mexico. The poem initially places the reader in the Philippines, near Luzon, which is not far from the capital city of the Philippines, Manila. The Sierre Madre of Mexico, which appear in the second half of the poem, echo back to the 1800s when the Filipino people revolted against Spanish rule and a new, more hopeful sun of freedom rose. The "Infanta" or the daughters of Spanish royalty melted away. But the revolt of 1872 was just a taste of what was to come. The Filipino people would experience many small victories and dark times before gaining political freedom in 1986. One of the early Filipino revolutionaries was Doctor Jose Rizal. Rizal was a writer, a poet, and "dynamite man," who inspired many Filipinos to seek freedom. The poem intimates that he was a "rummager," a "scourer," and a "dynamite" man, the kind of revolutionary that was needed to make the revolution happen. In 1892, Rizal was captured and later killed. With Rizal's death, and the death of his revolutionary contemporaries, the push for revolution died as well.

The poem suggests that in the dark times, the revolution must be lured into the light. The dark times lasted a long time in the Philippines. From 1898 until 1986, the Philippines had a succession of oppressive rulers, ending in 1986 with the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos. The poem reminisces about the fall of the more contemporary regime. The smoking mountain in the latter half of the poem recalls a place in Manila, which Fenton recalls in "The Snap Election." The smoking mountain was a burning mountain of garbage, which came to represent the current state of politics under Marcos. Many people, scavengers, much like the hermit crabs of the poem, were killed on the smoking mountain. The status of the country prompted, finally, what Fenton calls, a "non-revolution" or the basically uneventful turnover of the Philippines to the inexperienced governing force of Corazon Aquino.

Whereas Rizal, the "dynamite" man and legendary revolutionary, is compared to the vibrant, highbred creature dying on the line, Corazon Aquino's government is compared to the milkfish. The poem and, indeed, Fenton suggest that the Philippines is not ready for another "dynamite" man. For now, the country is ruled by a governing power that has not banished corruption in the military and has not truly dealt with the deeper issues of political and social freedom. The current state, then, is not a risen sun but the returning dawn of an in-between revolution. In this dawn, people sort through the political rubbish

like the milkfish gatherers looking for fish. Their will to revolutionize remains, but the means by which to achieve revolution still elude them.

Critical Overview

Fenton has made a name for himself as a journalistic poet. The poet as journalist is evident in the cinematic quality of his work. The critic Carol Rumens has analyzed his use of figurative language saying, "Metaphorical exuberance is out; the poet is par excellence a narrator, his metaphors a matter of action not image." Fenton is an ethnographer, historian, and anthropologist collecting images for the record.

Fenton's use of traditional English verse forms has placed him in the field of New Formalism, a sect that has returned to the roots of traditional poetry but makes use of contemporary themes and language. Because of his use of more traditional forms, Fenton has been compared to W. H. Auden, whose English standards are some of Britains most celebrated. Don Bogen, in a review of Fenton's latest collection *Out of Danger,* compares Fenton to Auden saying that the work is "grounded in speech but not self-dramatizing, at home with conventional forms, open to a range of tones including humor (but distrustful of high seriousness) and eminently sensible in its outlook." The same comments can be made of Fenton's work throughout his career. He has taken the traditional forms and modified them only enough to carve a niche for his own voice. His own voice involves an eclectic ensemble of subject and setting. In his most famous piece of literary criticism, "Of the Martian School," Fenton set out an idea for a new class or school of poetry, one that utilizes bizarre metaphors to illuminate every day objects. The poetry that came out of the Martian school is, as the famous poet Seamus Heaney said in a review in the *New Statesman,* "Highly self-conscious, anticonfessional, detached, laconic, and strangely popular considering their various devices for keeping the reader at arm's length." But, even so, there is something fresh about the voice, something that Fenton himself has coined, the "new recklessness," where "poets should yodel or write sonnet sequences as they see fit." The energy, not necessarily the ability to connect with the reader, is what draws the audience into the poem and intrigues them enough to stay.

The element of anticonfessinalism in Fenton's voice is balanced by the twists and turns of meter and subject. There is intrigue and mystery in Fenton's work. Stephen Spender, a critic writing for the *New Republic* says, "the poet has created within the poem a mysterious world with mysterious laws which work by their own logic. One feels there is a need of some ideological system of belief which would make everything clear." Fenton relies on his readers to make their own clarity in a world of chaos. His poetry is both of the world as well as acting in it. It is full of social commentary and critiques of politics, modern values, and the world of art. As critic Ian Parker, writing for the New Yorker says, Fenton "takes metre into new and marvelous places of public and private alarm while keeping an eye on Byron, W. H. Auden, Lewis Carroll, eighteenth century satire, and music hall." Critics generally celebrate Fenton's revitalization of form and his use of it to cross divides between tradition and modernity, academia and journalism, and humor and seriousness.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Taibl has published most frequently in fields of nineteenth and twentieth-century poetry. In the following essay, she discusses revolution of the political and literary variety in "The Milkfish Gatherers."

"The Milkfish Gatherers" is a poem about revolution. In it, James Fenton uses the political history of the Filipino independence quest as an extended metaphor to illustrate literary revolution. Fenton crosses divides of form and subject matter, bringing contemporary ideas to a traditional verse form and foreign lands to universal assimilation. Fenton is a political poet whose first concern is language. In "The Milkfish Gatherers," he marries the political to the private, the form to chaos, and the past to a vital future.

Fenton's sense of past begins with the form of his poetry. Fenton has said, in an interview with the reviewer Ian Parker in an article for the *New Yorker,* that his feeling is "that poetry will wither on the vine if you don't regularly come back to the simplest fundamentals of the poem; rhythm, rhyme, simple subjects—love, death, war." "The Milkfish Gatherers," written in quatrains or stanzas with four lines, is perfectly rhymed every second and fourth line of each stanza. This rhythm allows for feelings of the sea, which is the subject of the first line, a repeated line, "The sea sounds insincere / giving and taking with one hand." The rhythm of the sea is evident and heightened by the rhyme scheme, as are Fenton's use of lines as refrains, lines that break like waves with the poem and return again and again, cresting to emphasize a point.

Fenton utilizes long standing poetic traditions to break new ground. Peter Stitt, a critic and writer, addresses Fenton's use of form in his article "Harnessing the Horse" saying, "A poet like Fenton, it may be, shows his conservatism by writing out of the tradition handed down to him, changing it only enough to accommodate his own voice." Indeed, Fenton is considered a student of W. H. Auden's work, yet he alters the form and subject matter just enough to emphasize his own will. Dan Bogen, a critic writing for *The Nation,* suggests that Fenton's poetry "comes out of what may be called the Auden tradition in English verse; grounded in speech but not self-dramatizing, at home with conventional forms, open to a range of tones, including humor (but distrustful of high seriousness) and eminently sensible in its outlook." This is high praise for the poet who emulated Auden in his Oxford days. Yet Fenton reaches beyond Auden's subjects and embraces the world on political and social levels. Fenton has not thought of himself as a poet but as an archeologist and historian, a journalist and an ethnographer. His experiences, especially as a journalist, appear again and again in his poems and bring a certain life and vitality to his work.

"The Milkfish Gatherers" is a fine example of how Fenton marries his political schemes to his art. The poem handily drops place clues like "Luzon" and the catching of "milkfish" and emphasizes a tone of sinister doings. This establishes the place as the Philippines in an age of revolutionary struggle that began in the late 1800s as the Filipino people defined their desire for a revolution to free them from Spain's rule. The Filipino

revolution began in 1872 as pockets of activists began to define the needs of people but did not reach maturity and victory until 1898. It was at this time that a short-lived freedom was established before the country was plunged into the darkness of dictatorship again, a darkness that slightly dissipated with the fall of the Marcos regime in 1986. The history of Filipino revolution is long and embittered. The poem chronicles the fear of the people and their pure will to survive, like the stevedore running to unload ships. The chief aim of the poem on a revolutionary level is to emphasize how the world must be ready to receive a revolution before it can truly occur. The beautiful insect-shark that has "burst its skin" is the premature revolution that has fallen "too soon" into the world. Bogen writes, "Like Auden, Fenton is a fundamentally social poet, working toward verse that is out in the world, significant and accessible to readers." The poetry is not simple by any means, indeed, the revolution is not simple, yet the poem provides clues to its meaning and allows for interpretation on many levels.

As a poet of the world, Fenton allows a sense of universality to enter his work. The revolution begun in "The Milkfish Gatherers" is a revolution in the traditional sense. It is concerned with change, it is full of fear and uncertainty, and it puts only a small amount of order on a larger chaos. Stitt writes, "there is that ironic power, the way the chaos of the described situation mercilessly undermines the pretension to harmony put forth by the form." The revolution suggests a chaos that Fenton plays with in form to heighten the tension between harmony and cacophony. The revolution can be read not just as a Filipino or even a political revolution; the lines the fishermen are casting could very well be poetic lines and the revolution that is occurring could very well be a revolution of poetic style and voice.

Fenton is fond of making waves. In his most celebrated piece of literary criticism, "Of the Martian School," Fenton discusses the need for a new school of poetry and calls for practitioners of "bizarre metaphors" to illuminate everyday objects. The milkfish is such a bizarre metaphor with its "two eyes on a glass noodle." The common, toothless fish of the Pacific is the revolutionary idea not fully hatched as well as the mediocre poem not fully flushed out. The ability of the extended metaphor to illuminate on different levels is part of Fenton's strength. Carol Rumens, a writer and critic writing for *Poetry Review,* says that "Fenton's purposeful eye trains itself over events and scenes from a distance; the vision has a cinematic quality in common with the scientist and the journalist telling us human interest stories, though his field is the macrocosm rather than the microcosm." Fenton's wide ranging eye coupled with his tendency toward the strange and illuminating metaphor makes "The Milkfish Gatherers" touchable by all. What the poem lacks in the realm of the confessional as a means to engage the reader, it makes up for in the use of the intriguing image and the vastness of the real world.

"The Milkfish Gatherers" travels from Luzon, a city in the Philippines, to Mexico's Sierre Madre, and then to the vast ocean. This geography speaks to the poem's political situation, but it also serves to disorient the reader and place the ideas of the poem in a more universal light. John Bayley, a critic writing for the *Times Literary Review*, says, "Fenton's strength is to get the external world of his travels and readings into his art, not to refine and enlarge upon a world of his own imagining." Though Fenton's imaginings are an intriguing riprap of unfinished cultural business, his strength lies in meeting the

world on its own terms and using his skill with language to illuminate its truth. His travels as a journalist and figurehead for social justice contribute to the depth and vastness of his poems. Rumens writes, "Fenton's experience as a war correspondent in Indo-China is important not simply because it has given him a broader geographical and political terrain in which to operate, but because it has enabled him to take possession of an alien subject matter—other people's culture and wars—in a way that allows for and absorbs the alienation." Fenton makes the revolution everyone's revolution. He allows for the elasticity in the poem, defines it according to what he knows of language and human tendency, and he uses form to push at the chaos presented by the world.

For all of Fenton's leanings toward tradition, there are elements of his voice and style that speak to the goals of the revolution, a new and spirited voice. Fenton takes what he knows and loves of English verse and plays with it. Waves break in "The Milkfish Gatherers" as refrains ebb and flow, emphasizing the spirit of the line and the persistence of an idea. This kind of form in a long narrative creates what Fenton has called a "new recklessness." Parker describes Fenton as "a rap fogey, who is forever commuting across the divide—or showing that there was no divide in the first place—between ancient and modern, scholarship and journalism, journalism and poetry, poetry and song, sense and nonsense, socialism and luxury, selfmockery and high-seriousness." Fenton is pigeonholed, then, in what is called the New Formalism or a school of poetry in that he takes traditional verse forms and injects them with the verbiage and cultural baggage of contemporary times.

"The Milkfish Gatherers" chronicles a revolution, that has been on-going. It suggests, as most good poetry does, a universality of the revolutionary idea. Fenton makes it vital as he pays homage to his mentors, Lord Byron, W. H. Auden, and Lewis Carroll, without practicing the trend of confessionalism embraced so viciously by Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton. Fenton does not follow trends, he creates new ones. After all, this is a man who has translated Verdi's opera "Rigoletto" into English, reviewed all our culture's best at the theater, and traveled the world. Parker says, "Fenton has lived with a pet monkey in Phnom Penh, farmed prawns in the Philippines, eaten a bowl of live ants—that sort of thing" and given us a new spin on old rules much to the delight of readers. Fenton's revolution is an on-going one. It is grounded in what he knows, and it explores what he doesn't know. He pulls readers along for the ride proving, as Parker says, "Things do matter and on these issues, he [Fenton] keeps his readers posted."

Source: Erika Taibl, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Erica Smith is a writer and editor. In the following essay, she examines James Fenton's "The Milkfish Gatherers" from his 1994 volume Out of Danger. Smith discusses how the poem's speaker brings forth images of violence that illustrate the dangers present in the Phillipines.

The poem opens with a meditation on the sea: "The sea sounds insincere / Giving and taking with one hand." The speaker seems to be accusing the sea. Furthermore, in the following lines the speaker describes how the sea closed up a river the month before, "filling its mouth with sand." The brutality of this image intimates that the speaker's world is hazardous.

The speaker then turns his attention to those who are gathering the milkfish fry (young fish). He describes the tiny fish as "two eyes on a glass noodle, nothing more." The description is at once endearing and strange. The reader may be reminded of a polliwog, but the image also has a grotesque power. In the next few lines, the importance of the milkfish becomes apparent: the speaker notes that there is a stevedore keeping watch over the milkfish gatherers, together with his "vigilant" young wife. As the stevedore runs to meet a load of wood, the speaker notices that he is barefoot and wearing only shorts and a cap. Clearly the region is impoverished, and whatever business they do must be carefully guarded.

The following stanzas continue to emphasize this feeling of watchfulness. The speaker draws attention to nipa booths along the coast that protect the rights of the milkfish gatherers, commenting that "nothing goes unobserved." The stevedore, whom he calls "my good custodian," issues an ominous warning that "not everybody is a friend." The reader gains a sense that the speaker is an outsider, one who needs to be protected in an unfamiliar environment. This need for protection isolates the speaker; he comments that the stevedore "makes my life more private still."

The viciousness and danger to which the stevedore alludes is reflected in the speaker's portrait of his surroundings. He looks at the animals:

But the dogs are sly with the garbage
And the cats ruthless, even with sliced bread,
As the terns [marine birds] are ruthless among the shoals.

Coincidentally, the speaker chooses to single out two animals that are commonly considered beloved pets in Western culture. It is significant that they are presented here as wild&mash;devious and competitive. The common perceptions and comforts of the Western world have no place in these surroundings, and the reader gains the sense that all the speaker's assumptions about the world have been turned upside-down.

It is interesting to note that although the speaker is writing in plain, clear language, he relies on the reader's powers of inference to discern the emotional climate. The facts of

the omnipresent danger are conveyed as if from a distance; the speaker does not directly communicate his feelings, instead he reflects them off the stevedore and the animals. Seamus Heaney, writing in the *New York Review of Books,* also commented on this phenomenon in Fenton's work, calling Fenton's work "anticonfessional, detached, laconic." Others, such as Ellen Kreger Stark in *Critical Quarterly,* have argued that Fenton's work—and this volume in particular&mash;is indeed confessional. The critical difference, according to Stark, is that Fenton's confessionalism does not rely on autobiographical detail; and the end result is that it serves to more clearly expose the primal violence of the world. With regard to this poem, the reader may resolve these opposing viewpoints by envisioning the speaker's descriptions as echoes he sounds out to his surroundings. In turn, the calls that come back are even more resonant and better understood than what was first issued forth.

In turn, the speaker moves his attention to the water. Men are out in boats,

dragging a wide arc through the blue,
trailing their lines,
Cutting the engine out
At the first sign.

The sign they are looking for, presumably, is of fish. The speaker sees one nearby: "Something of value struggles not to die. / It will sell for a dollar a kilo." Again, common assumptions about the world are being turned on their head: the value of a thing is not in its life, or preservation, but its death. Here, one looks at a fish and sees money; the speaker notes that as the men gather fish "the hull fills with a fortune." The face of death, however, is quite clear and unsavory to the speaker. Looking at the fish, he comments that "the spine lives when the brain dies / In a convulsive misery."

While the fish are being collected into the boat, other men venture forth using another tactic. They are "Rummagers of inlets, scourers of the deep, / Dynamite men, their bottles crammed with wicks." Presumably they set off explosions in water to kill large quantities of fish, and then collect the bodies. The speaker points out that despite their grisly task, these men have a sense of humor; they "named the sea's inhabitants with style—/ The slapped vagina fish, the horse's dick." This sexual innuendo is the first instance of levity in the poem.

The following stanzas also take the speaker away from the imminent realities of death and danger. The sun is setting, and the speaker's words capture its pure beauty:

Polillo 'melts' means it is far away—
The smoking island plumed from slash and burn.
And from its shore, busy with hermit crabs,
Look to Luzon. Infanta melts in turn.The setting sun behind the Sierra Madre
Projects asharp blue line across the sky
And in the eastern glow beyond Polillo
It looks as if another sun might rise—

These lines are of staggering elegance, and the reader is left awestruck. Even the decimated island of Polillo is shrouded in metaphor. The scenery is bathed in light; the speaker bids the reader to "[l]ook to Luzon," the largest island in the Philippines, as well as to California's Sierra Madre. The effect of the light captures the speaker's imagination, to the point where he imagines another sun rising as this one goes down.

In the next lines, he considers that there would be no night. Yet he quickly rails against that thought: "No night! No death! How would these people live? / How could the pressure lanterns lure the prawns?" The irony of this statement is that the aura of fear that surrounds the area is, in effect, representative of night; and death abounds. Yet night is literally a necessity for these people in their work, as they use lanterns to lure fish.

The speaker then makes a statement of defeat: "Nothing of value has arrived all day— / No timber, no rattan." After the intoxicating quality of the sundown, this is a jarring snap back to reality. And when word comes that a shark is being brought in, and the animal arrives, its presence takes over:

The young receive the gills, which they will cook.
The massive liver wallows on the shore
And the shark's teeth look like a row of sharks
Advancing along a jaw.

The beast, even when in pieces, is still immense and awe-inspiring. One can imagine the speaker staring dumbfounded at the sight of it. Yet soon the speaker is transfixed by another sight. In a stark moment, "by spirit light," he sees that "something" is hanging from a post. It appears that whatever it is, it has burst its skin and is hanging on tenuously to life. The reader may presume that it is what remains of the shark, disemboweled but not yet dead. This is a truly terrifying state of existence, and the speaker describes it unflinchingly:

Clinging exhausted to its former self,
Its head flung back as if to watch the moon,
The blue-green veins pulsing along its wings,
The thing unwraps itself, but falls too soon.

This is a transcendent moment much like that of the setting sun, but unlike the earlier moment this one is both beautiful and grisly. It is abjectly interrupted as the dying animal falls to the ground and is soon covered by ants that will surely devour it.

Having witnessed these extraordinary instances of beauty and death, the speaker turns his attention to something else entirely: the milkfish, the image prevalent at the beginning of the poem. This time he notes the milkfish gatherers themselves, whom he calls "human fry." The speaker seems to be blurring the distinction between human being and fish, perhaps implying that humans are no more special than fish. Then he ends the stanza by mentioning that "a white polythene bowl / Is what you need to sort the milkfish by." Taken together, these lines form a stanza that reads almost like a

didactic nursery rhyme, retaining the *abcb* rhyme structure that has prevailed throughout the poem. These few lines, however, sound dreamy and singsongy, as if the speaker is lost in reflection.

The concluding stanza capitalizes on this eerie quality by being yet another refrain: the last two lines echo, "the spine lives when the brain dies / In a convulsive misery." In light of the death of the shark, these lines, when repeated, take on more meaning. The speaker has seen misery and has lived among death. The speaker is shaken, and, by extension, the reader is left jarred.

Source: Erica Smith, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

An audiocassette called *Poets Night* features eleven poets, including Fenton, reading from their work and the work of their mentors, as they celebrate the contribution Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux has made to the publishing of poetry. The cassette was released in 1998 by Penguin audio books.

A video recording on Fenton's translation of the Verdi opera *Rigoletto* was released by HBO Video in 1982.

Topics for Further Study

Explain how the poem takes geography into consideration. How do the elements of geography contribute to the feeling and meaning of the poem?

Revolutions require passionate people to fight as a cohesive whole. Report on what psychologists say are the traits of a revolutionary. Discuss the ways Fenton illuminates these traits in the poem.

Linguists are concerned with how language evolves and changes. Research what it takes to have a linguistic revolution. In other words, what do experts say inspires changes in language?

Compare and Contrast

1972: Richard Nixon is reelected President of the United States in a near-record landslide. Democrats win majorities in both houses.

1980: Ronald Reagan becomes the fortieth President of the United States after a landslide victory over Jimmy Carter; Republicans control the Senate for the first time since 1964.

1986: President Reagan admits secret arms deals with Iran in breach of the U.S. arms embargo (the "Irangate" scandal).

1972: Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos declares martial law in response to what he calls a "communist rebellion"; Marcos assumes neardictatorial powers.

1986: In the Philippines' presidential election, Ferdinand Marcos retains the presidency by defeating Corazon Aquino, who alleges extensive ballot rigging; subsequently Marcos flees the Philippines, and Corazon Aquino becomes the new President.

What Do I Read Next?

The "Collected Poems" by W. H. Auden and edited by Edward Mendelson, offers a glimpse into the roots of contemporary British poetry. Auden was a mentor to many contemporary poets writing in English. The collected poems offer insight into the range, skill, and depth of his work.

Besides being a political journalist and poet, Fenton has also spent many years as a theater critic for the London *Sunday Times.* His witty and entertaining drama reviews are collected in a book titled *You Were Marvellous,* offering yet another look at a truly renaissance, writing man.

The Martian school, which Fenton brought into being with his critical article "Of the Martian School," includes many talented contemporary British poets. Craig Raine is among these contemporaries. His book, *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home,* introduces readers to another member of the Martian school of poetry.

Fenton has been called a New Formalist or a practitioner of traditional verse forms in a contemporary atmosphere. He is not the only one embracing the old in new and exciting ways. *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism,* brings together twenty five new formalists and allows them to strut their poetic skills and prove that English verse is not dead but alive and kicking.

Seamus Heaney, Irish poet and winner of the 1995 Nobel prize for poetry, has been a vocal critic of Fenton and his school. Two of Heaney's collections of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist* and Seeing Things, offer a view of another celebrated and inspiring voice in contemporary poetry.

Further Study

Espada, Martin, ed., *Poetry Like Bread: Poets of the Political Imagination from Curbstone Press*, Curbstone Press, 1994.

This is a unique anthology of thirty poets whose focus is writing about political topics. Settings range from Algeria and Vietnam, to Los Angeles and Philadelphia. This collection has something to offer anyone interested in how literature and poetry, in particular, have a political voice.

Fenton, James, *All the Wrong Places: Adrift in the Politics of the Pacific Rim,* Little, Brown Publishers, 1988.

Fenton offers what he knows and has experienced in the Philippines during the "snap revolution," as well as what he has learned and experienced in Vietnam and Korea. The book offers a keen understanding and a valuable perspective on the situation in the whole Pacific.

------, "The Snap Revolution: James Fenton in the Philippines," in *Granta*, 1986, pp. 34-155.

Fenton offers a unique account of the Marcos regime. His riveting and informed account of the revolution and fight for independence of the Filipino people is inspiring and highly intelligent. While fascinating for pure literary value, "The Snap Revolution" also offers savvy political commentary and a fresh perspective on the more contemporary story of the Philippines.

Thompson, Mark R., *The Anti-Marcos Struggle: Personalistic Rule and Democratic Transition in the Philippines,* Yale University Press, 1996.

This book intelligently explores the recent history of the Philippines and the fall of the Marcos rule. It explores issues of democracy and the challenges faced by a still developing democratic nation.

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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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