My Life with the Wave Study Guide

My Life with the Wave by Octavio Paz

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Octavio Paz, Mexico's foremost poet of the twentieth century after World War II, was awarded the 1990 Nobel Prize for Literature. "My Life with the Wave," a surrealist prose poem, first appeared in his collection *lAguila o sol?* (translated as *Eagle or Sun?)* in 1951.

In "My Life with the Wave," a man, while at the beach, is seduced by an ocean wave, which insists on following him home to Mexico City. The man and the wave have a passionate, turbulent, love affair, in which the wave is both adoring and demanding. Because she is lonely, he brings her a school of fish to swim in her waters; but, when he becomes enraged with jealousy of her attentions to the fish, he tries to attack them, and the wave nearly drowns him. After that, his love for the wave turns to "fear and hate." To get away from her, he leaves home for a month. When he returns, he finds that the winter weather has turned the wave into "a statue of ice." With cold malice, he sells the frozen wave to a friend of his, a waiter at a restaurant, who chops the ice into small pieces to be used for cooling drinks.

Paz represents the wave as a metaphorical image of a woman in love, associating the feminine with nature, passion, and emotional turbulence. In representing the "authorities" who arrest, interrogate, imprison, and try the narrator, Paz further explores themes of freedom and oppression.

Author Biography

Octavio Paz was born on March 31, 1914, in Mexico City, Mexico during the Mexican Revolution. His father, a lawyer, worked for the revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata.

Paz attended the University of Mexico from 1932-1937. Upon graduating, he traveled to Spain where he became a sympathizer with the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War.

Paz joined the Mexican Foreign Service in 1946, serving as the Mexican cultural attaché in Paris until 1951. From 1962-1968, he was the Mexican ambassador to India, but resigned this post in protest against the Mexican government firing on student demonstrators at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. Paz subsequently taught as a professor in Latin American studies and literature at several prestigious universities in England and the United States, including Cambridge and Harvard.

In 1937, Paz married Elena Garro, with whom he had a daughter, and later divorced. While in India, Paz met the French woman Marie-José Tramini, whom he married in 1964.

Paz's literary career began early with the publication of his first book of poems, *Luna silvestre (Forest Moon),* in 1933 at the age of 19. Throughout the next sixty-five years, he published numerous collections of essays and poetry. *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), considered his masterpiece, is a long essay on Mexican culture and history. *lAguila o sol?* (1951; translated as *Eagle or Sun?)* is a collection of prose poems. Other major works include *The Sun Stone* (1957), a long poem, and *The Monkey Grammarian* (1974), a collection of essays based on his experiences in India.

Throughout his life, Paz founded and edited a number of literary journals, including *El Popular* and *Taller* in the 1930s, *El hijo Pródigo* in the 1940s, and *Plural* in the 1970s. In 1976, he founded the journal *Vuelta,* of which he was the editor throughout the rest of his life.

In 1990, Paz received the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died of cancer on April 19, 1998.

Plot Summary

The narrator, while at the beach, is seduced by an ocean wave, which begs to be taken home with him. He tries to explain that she would not like life in the city, but she insists. To bring her home on the train, he empties the drinking fountain tank and secretly pours the wave into it. But when a lady takes a drink and discovers that the water is salty, her husband calls the conductor over, accusing the narrator of contaminating the water. The conductor calls in the Inspector, who calls the police, who accuse the narrator of poisoning the water. The police then call in the Captain, who calls three agents. The agents take the narrator away and throw him in jail where he is interrogated and accused of trying to poison the children on the train. After a year in jail, he is tried and, soon after, set free.

When the narrator arrives home, the wave is already at his house. She explains that someone had poured the "contaminated" water from the drinking fountain onto the engine, where she became steam and, as such, rode the train the rest of the way to Mexico City.

The narrator states that the wave's presence in his home "changed my life." He carries on a passionate love affair with the wave, to whom "Love was a game, a perpetual creation." Her moods are as changeable as the tide, and she engulfs him with her love. When the wave complains that she is lonely, he brings her seashells and toy ships to wreck; but this is not enough, and he brings her a colony of fish to play with. However, he soon becomes jealous of the wave's attentions to the fish. One day, he "couldn't stand it anymore," and tries to attack the fish; but the fish slip through his fingers, and the wave sucks him under her water and nearly drowns him. Although she is affectionate and apologetic afterward, he begins "to fear and hate her."

After this incident, the narrator realizes that he had been neglecting his other responsibilities. He begins to stay away from home more, to see old friends, and even to meet with an old girlfriend. He tells her of his troubles with the wave, and she wishes to help him, but there is nothing she can do.

As their relationship deteriorates, the wave becomes petulant and brooding. With the onset of winter, she grows increasingly angry and violent, bringing forth "monsters from the deep." Unable to stand her any more, the narrator flees to the wilderness in the mountains, staying away for a month.

By the time he returns, the weather has turned so cold that the wave has frozen into "a statue of ice." Without feeling, he puts the frozen wave into a sack and takes her to a restaurant on the outskirts of the city, where he sells her to a waiter friend who immediately chops her up into small pieces, and puts the ice in buckets for chilling bottles of refreshments.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

A wave from the sea develops an attraction for a man, detaches itself from the sea and follows him. In the spirit of the poem, the wave assumes the persona of a woman. Despite the protests of family and friends and the man's attempt to dissuade her, she wants to be with the man. The man hides the wave in a water tank in the train and tries to stop people from drinking water from the tank. One lady persists in drinking the water, and when she finds the water to be salty, the man is accused of having put salt in the water tank. The accusations multiply until he is accused of trying to poison the children. He is arrested, taken to jail, and judged, but he is eventually released because the water harmed nobody. When he returns home, the man finds the wave waiting for him inside. She tells him that she was taken out of the water tank and when they discovered that there was no poison and that the water was simply salty, they poured her into the engine. She changed into vapor and became rain. Eventually, she found her way to his house.

The presence of the wave changes the man's life. She tempts the sun to visit and replaces his dusty airless apartment with beautiful sounds, light and air. She creates a new world for him, one filled with constant change and excitement. She seduces him with her sensuality, her loveliness and her many unpredictable forms.

However, unlike other women, he cannot reach her core, the part of her that makes her vulnerable. Instead, she is constantly changing and sucks him in the whirlwind of her nature. He feels powerless and lost. She is a fantastic force that he cannot fathom.

Despite his misgivings, their intimacy continues. She is a passionate lover, though she is also transparent. He can see right through her; there are no secret places. She is violent and full of uncontrollable rage.

Eventually, the wave becomes bored and unhappy. The man presents her with multicolored fish that could swim in her and make her happy, but her intimacy with the fish makes him jealous. Furious at one of the tiger fish, he lashes out at the fish colony, but the wave pounds him until he turns blue and collapses. She revives him, but he becomes afraid of her.

He gets back in touch with old friends he had neglected while enjoying his life with the wave. One of his ex-lovers tries to help him decipher the mysteries of the wave, but a human female's mind is no match for the wave.

When winter approaches, the wave's mood turns sullen. She frightens him with her dark moods. He abandons her often and finds that her mood has become worse when he returns. One time, he comes home to find that she has frozen into a statue. He sells the statue to a waiter friend who chops it up into pieces.

Analysis

In this fable, Nobel Prize winner Mexican poet, Octavio Paz explores the basic human condition of an intimate relationship between a man and a woman. He uses a surrealistic metaphor to delve into the complexities of romantic journeys. This surrealism is sometimes referred to as "magical realism," especially when dealing with literature of South and Central America. In literary works of magical realism, objects often take on a life of their own and things that seem to only be possible in the world of the supernatural interact with the human world in a very natural way.

A wave from the sea becomes the metaphor for an extremely strong and independent woman who selects the man as a mate and does not allow friends or family, or even the chosen lover to stop her from following her heart's desire. The decision to abandon her natural settings leads to a set of mishaps where she and the man are separated. It is her character that forces the separation but it is also her character that allows her to change form and travel to the man's house. The couple enjoys an exciting intimacy. Her unpredictable nature creates a bed of erotic and romantic playfulness that sweep the man off his feet.

The man wants to reach further into her, to find her soul, her center of being. He needs to find something vulnerable to love, a path for forming an emotional connection. She does not have a core, though, becauseshe is only a wave. The source of his excitement, her ever-changing nature, starts to become the source of his despair. He does not understand that he himself is her vulnerability; she has given up her world and her self just to be with him. He does not understand her and feels lost in attempting to do so. Therein lay the seeds that will eventually unravel their relationship.

Their relationship starts to change as their emotional and physical worlds collide pulling the two apart. They fight. Her mood changes constantly and leaves him feeling both in awe of her power and frustrated by the distance that it creates between them.

She becomes bored in her new world. He tries to recreate that world within the confines of his home. However, then he feels alienated from her world and jealous of the fish that now share that world with her and the intimacy that was once only his. His jealous rage renders him weak, vulnerable and afraid of his lover. He tries to get away from her to pull himself together. He seeks help from friends. However, it is too late. The relationship has changed. He is fearful; she is progressively becoming sullen and cold. When she becomes so cold that he no longer has any use left for her, he disposes of her.

The metaphor of the wave is used to symbolize the fact that entering an intimate relationship is akin to encountering a new world. The wave, as many sudden intimate relationships, is fleeting in nature. A wave is a temporal being, with a limited lifespan by its very nature. Yet, the arc of the relationship is almost predictable from that of the initial excitement to the eventual disappointment when the people involved are unable to form an emotional connection.

Characters

The police call the Captain and tell him the narrator is a poisoner. The Captain calls in three agents to arrest the narrator.

The Children

On the train, where the narrator has secretly stored the wave in the water fountain tank, some children try to drink from the fountain, but the narrator blocks their way and offers to buy them lemonade instead. He is later accused of trying to poison the children by contaminating the water.

The Conductor

After he is told that the narrator has contaminated the water in the fountain, the Conductor of the train calls upon the Inspector.

The Fish

When the wave complains of loneliness, the narrator installs a colony of fish in the house. The fish soon monopolize the wave's attentions, and the narrator regards them from the perspective of a jealous lover: "It was not without jealousy that I watched them swimming in my friend, caressing her breasts, sleeping between her legs, adorning her hair with little flashes of color." The narrator begins to see the fish as a threat, and describes them as menacing and potentially violent: "Among those fish there were a few particularly repulsive and ferocious ones, little tigers from the aquarium with large fixed eyes and jagged bloodthirsty mouths." The narrator comments that the wave "delighted in playing with them, shamelessly showing them a preference whose significance I prefer to ignore." Finally, he is overcome with jealousy of the fish, and in a violent rage, dives into the water to attack them. But the fish are "agile and ghostly" and slip through his hands.

The Husband

After the lady on the train has tasted the water from the fountain and discovered that it is salty, her husband calls on the conductor.

The Inspector

He is called upon by the Conductor to investigate the narrator.

The Jailer

The Jailer, like all of the other authorities, does not believe the narrator's story about putting the wave in the water cooler, and accuses him of trying to poison the children.

The Lady on the Train

After the narrator secretly hides the wave inside the tank of the water fountain on the train, a lady approaches with her husband and, despite the narrator's protests, pours herself a glass of water. When she tastes the water, and discovers that it is salty, her husband calls the conductor.

The Magistrate

While in jail, the narrator is brought before the Magistrate, who assigns him to a Penal Judge.

The Narrator

The narrator of "My Life with the Wave" is not identified by name. He speaks in the first person narrative voice, meaning that he tells the story from the point-of-view of a single character, referred to as "I." While at a beach, the narrator is seduced by an ocean wave, which insists on going home with him. The narrator and the wave have a passionate love affair that changes his life, bringing him happiness and joy. When the wave complains of loneliness, he brings her a school of fish to play with. However, he soon becomes jealous of her attentions to the fish, and tries to attack them; but the fish merely slip through his fingers, and the wave almost drowns him. After this incident, he begins to "fear and hate" her. To avoid the company of the wave, he spends more time away from home. Finally, when he can no longer stand the dark, violent moods of the wave, he leaves home to stay in the wilderness in the mountains. After a month, he returns home, and finds that, as the weather has cooled, the wave is frozen into a "statue of ice." Without feeling, he puts the frozen wave into a sack and takes it to a restaurant on the outskirts of the city; there, he sells it to a waiter friend, who immediately chops it into little pieces and puts it in a bucket for keeping drinks cold.

An Old Girlfriend

After the narrator begins to "fear and hate" the wave, he meets with "an old girlfriend" whom he tells of his secret "life with the wave." He comments, "Nothing moves a woman so much as the possibility of saving a man." He refers to her as "my redeemer," but observes that she could do nothing to save him from his relationship with the wave.

Penal Judge

The Penal Judge is assigned the narrator's case.

The Police

The Inspector on the train calls the police, and tells them that the narrator has poisoned the water in the fountain. The police then call the Captain.

Three Agents

The Captain of the police calls three agents, who drag the narrator off to jail, on accusation of contaminating the drinking fountain on the train.

A Waiter Friend

In the very end of the story, the narrator takes the wave, now frozen into "a statue of ice," to a restaurant outside the city and sells it to a waiter friend, who chops it into little pieces which he puts in a bucket for keeping bottles cold.

The Warden

After a year in jail, the narrator is tried and given a "light" sentence. Before he is released, the Warden warns him not to let the same crime happen again, threatening, "next time you'll really pay for it."

The Wave

The wave in this story is a metaphor for a woman in love. The narrator first encounters the wave at a beach, and she insists on going home with him to Mexico City. The wave and the narrator have a passionate, though turbulent, love affair. When the wave complains of loneliness, the narrator brings her a school of fish to entertain her; however, she is so affectionate with the fish that he becomes enraged with jealousy. When he tries to attack the fish, the wave almost drowns him, after which he begins to "fear and hate" her. When he starts spending more and more time away from home, the wave becomes angry and miserable. While he is away for a month in the mountains, the weather turns cold and the wave freezes into a "statue of ice." The narrator returns home to find her frozen solid but is "unmoved by her wearisome beauty." He heartlessly puts her into a sack and sells her to a restaurant to be chopped up and used as ice to cool drinks.

Themes

"My Life with the Wave" is the story of a love affair between a man and an ocean wave. Many qualities the narrator describes in the wave represent those of a woman in love, moved by turbulent passions and ever-changing moods. At first, the presence of the wave, like a new relationship, changes the narrator's life, bringing a rich emotional atmosphere of love, passion, affection, and excitement. But, when the wave begins to show a preference for the company of the fish, he becomes a jealous lover. After the wave almost drowns him, his love turns to "fear and hate." Although he begins to avoid the wave and seek company elsewhere, he remains trapped in the relationship. In the end, the love and passion between the man and the wave turns cold; returning home to find the wave frozen into a block of ice, he is "unmoved by her wearisome beauty." His final act toward the wave is one of cruelty, his love for her having chilled and hardened to ice, as he mercilessly destroys her, selling her to a waiter who chops her into tiny pieces. The relationship between the narrator and the wave has taken its course, from love and passion to hatred and cold-hearted spite.

Death

While love is the predominant theme of "My Life with the Wave," the theme of death runs parallel throughout the story. Even at the height of love between the man and the wave, images of death lurk within the depths of the relationship. Love itself becomes equated with death, as the love of the wave has a "smothering" affect on the man. As the wave's presence in his life becomes more threatening, she is increasingly associated with images of death and destruction. When he tries to attack the fish, the wave responds by nearly drowning him until he is "at the point of death." Afterward, the wave is apologetic and "her voice was sweet and she spoke to me of the delicious death of the drowned." This phrasing presents the image of a love so all-encompassing that it threatens to destroy the individual in a "delicious death." Thus, the lure of love is described as a temptation leading to the complete obliteration of the self.

After the narrator begins to spend more time away from home, the love of the wave becomes increasingly life-threatening. He again describes her love as smothering when he states that, "Her sweet arms became knotty cords that strangled me." In the end, the narrator essentially kills the wave, once his beloved companion, by selling her to be chopped up into little pieces.

Freedom and Oppression

Another central theme of "My Life with the Wave" is freedom and oppression. The various authorities who confront the narrator about the wave represent the oppressive nature of societal institutions. For example, the narrator is immediately concerned with the consequences of bringing a wave onto the train; his preoccupation with "the rules" demonstrates that he is accustomed to a society in which citizens are strictly "judged" and disciplined with respect to any infraction of a wide set of legal restrictions and societal taboos. He notes, "It's true the rules say nothing in respect to the transport of

waves on the railroad, but this very reserve was an indication of the severity with which our act would be judged." The narrator's fears are confirmed after it is discovered that he has "contaminated" the water in the drinking fountain; he is subjected to a series of authoritarian figures, each of whom condemns him without regard to his repeated explanations and pleas of innocence. The conductor of the train calls on the Inspector, who calls on the police, who call on the captain, who calls on three agents, who "push and drag" him to the nearest jail. Once in jail, he is again subjected to "long interrogations," and condemned by the jailer, the Magistrate, the Penal Judge, and the Warden, all of whom judge him to be guilty. Finally, he is set free, having served a "light" sentence for his victimless crime. Yet, once free, he soon becomes oppressed by the smothering love of the wave. As the relationship sours, his own home becomes more and more of a prison to him. Only when he escapes the wave by going to the wilderness in the mountains is he able to breathe "the cold thin air like a thought of freedom."

Style

Although it can be read as a short story, "My Life with the Wave" is included in a poetry collection, and is generally categorized as a "prose poem." A prose poem is written in the form of prose, but includes significant elements of poetry. "My Life with the Wave" is a prose poem in the sense that while it is a story written in prose, it includes elements of heightened emotion and imaginative fancy characteristic of poetry.

Narrative Voice and Point-of-View

"My Life with the Wave" is written from the first person point-of-view, meaning that the narrator, the main character in the story, tells the story from his own perspective. The first person narrative voice in this story represents a love relationship from the perspective of one of the lovers, portraying only one side of the story, which is how most people in real life experience love and relationships—from their own perspective.

Personification

Personification is a literary device by which an animal or inanimate object is given human traits, characteristics, and behaviors. The wave in "My Life with the Wave" is personified; it is represented as a woman in love. This stylistic choice creates a metaphorical comparison between the emotional ebb and flow of a woman in a relationship, and the turbulent, ever-changing nature of an ocean wave. The school of fish is also personified in this story, as the narrator sees them as rivals for the affection of the wave. Other natural elements, such as the stars and the wind, are also personified within the story.

Surrealism

"My Life with the Wave" is considered to be one of Paz's surrealist works of poetry. Surrealism was a movement in literature and the arts that developed in France during the post-World War I era. It grew out of, and in reaction to, a movement known as Dadaism, and was influenced by the theories of the unconscious mind put forth by Sigmund Freud. While living in Paris, Paz was strongly influenced by surrealism and became acquainted with André Breton, the "father" of the surrealist movement in literature. "My Life with the Wave" includes surrealist elements in the sense that it expresses the internal state of a man in and out of love through striking imagery and absurd concepts that forgo realism for the sake of expressiveness.

Historical Context

Paz grew up during the period of the Mexican Revolution in a family that sympathized with the revolutionary forces. The Mexican Revolution began in 1910 in protest against the reelection of President Porfirio Díaz, who had ruled the country since 1876. Díaz officially resigned in 1911, and the revolutionary leader Francisco Madero assumed the presidency. However, the war continued until 1917 as various coups and counter-revolutions were carried out between factions of the revolutionary movement. In 1913, Madero was deposed and assassinated, and Victoriano Huerta assumed the Presidency. In 1914, Huerta was deposed and Venustiano Carranza declared himself president. Anarchy and violence ensued as revolutionary leaders battled over control of the presidency. With the support of the United States, Carranza was once again put in office and oversaw the writing of the Constitution of 1917, which was an attempt to incorporate the demands of many factions that had fought in the Revolution. In 1919, Carranza had the revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata assassinated; in 1920, Carranza himself was deposed and killed while fleeing the country. While the Mexican Revolution had officially ended, armed conflict between government and rebel forces continued off and on until 1934.

The Spanish Civil War

Paz visited Spain in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War, which lasted from 1936-1939. The Spanish Civil War was fought between the right wing Nationalist rebels, supported by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, and the left wing Republican government, supported by the Soviet Union. Paz, at that time an ardent socialist, sympathized with the Republican cause, which was comprised of the urban working class, the rural agrarian workers, and much of the educated middle class of Spain. The Nationalist rebels were comprised of the military, the Roman Catholic Church, the landowners, and the business owners. The Nationalists won the war in 1939, and the military leader Francisco Franco was made dictator of Spain from that time until his death in 1975.

Mexico in the Post-World War II Era

"My Life with the Wave" was first published in 1951 during the Post-World War II era. Mexico had engaged in World War II on the side of the Allies from 1942-1945. While Mexican troops were sent to fight in the war, Mexico's primary contribution was in raw materials to the United States to be used in war production. After World War II, Mexico enjoyed a period of economic growth and prosperity, as well as a population boom. Many reforms were initiated by the Mexican government during this period, including granting women the right to vote in 1958.

The Tlatelolco Massacre

The 1968 Summer Olympic games were held in Mexico City. A student demonstration took place ten days before the start of the games to protest the expenditure of government resources on the Olympics, rather than for social welfare. The Mexican

army, however, surrounded the protestors and fired shots into the crowd, killing 250 people and wounding and arresting thousands of others. Paz, who was serving as Mexican ambassador to India during this time, immediately resigned his post in protest against the government's treatment of the student demonstrators. For years afterward, he remained a heroic figure in the eyes of student activists in Mexico.

Critical Overview

Octavio Paz is the most celebrated Mexican poet of the twentieth century in the Post-World War II era, and a major figure in Latin-American literature. His outstanding accomplishments in the writing of both essays and poetry were acknowledged when in 1990, he was the first Mexican to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Paz also received the 1982 Miguel de Cervantes prize, the most prestigious literary award in Latin America.

Critics frequently comment that the works of Paz embody both a uniquely Mexican character and a "universal" quality that transcends national boundaries. Celebrated Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes is quoted in *The Perpetual Present* (1973; edited by Ivar Ivask) as stating that Paz was the "greatest living Mexican writer," a "great renovator of the Spanish language," and "great universal poet and essayist."

"My Life with the Wave" first appeared as a prose poem in Paz's 1951 collection *lAguila o sol?* (translated as *Eagle or Sun?),* which describes the two sides of a coin-toss, equivalent to "heads or tails?" in the United States.

Eagle or Sun ? was immediately met with widespread critical acclaim. The *Los Angeles Times* noted that Paz's "distinctive surrealistic verse," as exemplified in this volume, "had broad appeal and was well-received by critics internationally." Jason Wilson, in *Octavio Paz* (1986), describes *Eagle or Sun?* as "one of [Paz's] most innovative books." He notes that in form it "breaks with Paz's past poetry by being in prose: prose poems that verge on essays, allegories, parables, manifestos, and short stories."

The poems collected in *Eagle or Sun ?* are noted as the culmination of Paz's "surrealist" phase, during which he lived in France and was influenced by the French surrealist movement in literature. According to Julio Ortega in "Notes on Paz" (1980), Paz's poetry during this period "transformed itself, assimilating from [S]urrealism its expressive openness and poetic independence."

Eliot Weinberger, in *Octavio Paz* (1984), observes, "Paz is generally read as Latin America's great surrealist poet." Critics primarily discuss the prose poems which comprise *Eagle or Sun?* in terms of the surrealist influence which they express in form, image, and thematic content. Jason Wilson in *Octavio Paz* (1979) asserts that, with *Eagle or Sun?,* Paz "embodied the surrealist's dream."

Rachel Phillips, in *The Poetic Modes of Octavio Paz* (1972), comments that the "surrealist mode," which is "implicit in the linguistic and imagistic struggles" of *Eagle or Sun?,* can be described as "the deliberate dislocation of the image in order to shock the recipient into a new vision" which "is particularly apt for the expression of a state of mind which is 'out of joint' with itself and its universe." She goes on to observe that there are many examples in *Eagle or Sun?* of the surrealist "use of the startling image to transform reality," particularly in terms of "images in weird and troubling combinations" which "disturb the acceptance of outer reality."

Wilson (1986) observes of *Eagle or Sun?* that the "frantic self-dialogues that sustain many of these prose poems" express man's "many conflicting selves." He explains that this volume "celebrates" Paz's "discovery through surrealism that art can be an action, an alternative to a political one, that liberates the inner man and fights for a world where art's effects are available to all."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses descriptive language in Paz's story.

"My Life with the Wave" is a tale of love turned to hate, of passion turned cold, of happiness and joy turned to bitterness and anger.

In expressing the elements of love and hate running through the relationship between the narrator and the wave, Paz employs contrasting imagery of white and black, light and darkness, heat and cold, and lively and menacing colors. He also describes a rich array of sounds—including music, singing, laughing, crying, screaming, moaning, whispers, and echoes—to evoke the tenor of the narrator' s relationship with the wave as his love for her transforms to hatred.

The positive elements of the relationship are expressed by the narrator's descriptions of the wave in terms of light, whiteness, lively colors, and heat. By contrast, the negative aspects of the relationship are expressed by the narrator's association of the wave with darkness, blackness, menacing colors, and cold. For good or ill, the wave is also associated with the ever-changing light of the heavenly bodies, such as the stars, the moon, and the sun.

At first, the wave has a positive influence on the narrator, changing his life for the better. He describes her presence in his home as bringing light, color, and warmth to a dark and lonely house. With the wave's presence, the house of "dark corridors and dusty furniture was filled with air, with sun, with green and blue reflections."

The light of happiness and joy that the wave brings into the life of the narrator is further indicated by her whiteness. After she is poured onto the train engine and turned to steam, the wave is described as "a white plume of vapor." In describing the pleasure and delight which the wave's love brings him, the narrator relates: "If I embraced her, she would ... flower into a fountain of white feathers, into a plume of laughs that fell over my head and back and covered me with whiteness."

The association of the wave with light is also described in terms of the transparency of the water. The narrator states that when she curled up with him in bed, the wave "became humble and transparent." The transparency and clearness of the wave metaphorically expresses a state of emotional honesty in which the lover is able to see through her to her inner thoughts and feelings: "She was so clear I could read all of her thoughts."

The wave's presence in the narrator's life is further associated with the light of the sun, which "entered the old rooms with pleasure and stayed for hours when it should have left the other houses, the district, the city, the country." This association extends to other heavenly bodies, such as the moon, the stars, and other galaxies. The narrator explains

that the wave's "sensibilities" spread outward like ripples, "until they touched other galaxies." He continues, "To love her was to extend to remote contacts, to vibrate with far-off stars we never suspect." In its association with the heavenly bodies, the love between the narrator and the wave is depicted as having a spiritual, infinite quality to it.

At times, the light emanating from the wave and bringing joy and passion to the life of the narrator is described in terms of a dramatic brilliance which illuminates the darkness of the world: "On certain nights her skin was covered with phosphorescence and to embrace her was to embrace a piece of night tattooed with fire." The association of the wave with the heat of fire also expresses the fiery passion between the two lovers.

The narrator's relationship with the wave is further expressed through descriptive sounds. When she is happy and in love, the wave's most characteristic sounds are laughter and singing. When the narrator returns home after a year in jail, the first inkling of the wave's presence are the sounds of "laughter and singing" emanating from inside his apartment. Upon entering, he finds the wave "singing and laughing as always." When he embraces her, the wave swells up and blooms into "a plume of laughs." Her laughter spreads throughout his home, so that "Everything began to laugh." The narrator basks in the music of her waters, as the wave envelops him "like music or some giant lips." Curled up with him in bed, "She sang in my ear, a little sea shell."

In addition to the laughter and music she brings into his home, the wave regales the narrator with other delightful sounds, "a numerous and happy populace of reverberations and echoes." In their joy and passion, the two lovers communicate in affectionate "murmurs" and "whispers": "Stretched out side by side, we exchanged confidences, whispers, smiles. Curled up, she fell on my chest and unfolded there like a vegetation of murmurs."

But, even at the high point of their relationship, the wave has dark moods. The narrator explains that, at times, she "became black and bitter." Just as she seems to reflect the light of the sun, she is equally influenced by the absence of sunlight and warm weather. The narrator states that, "Cloudy days irritated her." Just as her positive moods reflect the light and warmth of the sun and stars, so her dark moods are influenced by the movement of the heavenly bodies: "Subject to the moon, the stars, the influence of the light of other worlds, she changed her moods and appearance in a way that I thought fantastic."

With her foul and angry moods, the sounds of the wave also turn dark and sinister. On some nights "she roared, moaned, twisted." At these times, "Her groans woke the neighbors." The wave's "black and bitter moods" call forth angry sounds from the sea, for "Upon hearing her, the sea wind would scratch at the door of the house or rave in a loud voice on the roof." With these black moods, the wave's anger lashes out at her lover in violent verbal outbursts; at these times, she "said foul words.... Spat, cried, swore, prophesied."

As the relationship deteriorates, the colors of the wave, which once brought happiness and joy, come to express feelings of anger and pain. Cloudy weather has the effect of

sending her into a rage in which she "covered me with insults and gray and greenish foam." Where earlier the "green and blue reflections" of the wave brought happiness and joy to the narrator, in the wave's dark moods the colors gray and green express her bitterness and anger. Likewise, the "greenish" quality of her body in winter becomes a cruel, destructive force: "an implacable whip that lashed and lashed." When the wave almost drowns him, he describes this near-death experience by associating the color purple with asphyxiation; he becomes "purple and at the point of death."

Whereas the heat and light of the sun represented the wave's passion and love for the narrator, the cold and darkness of winter represents the cooling of their passion and waning of their love: "Winter came. The sky turned gray. Fog fell on the city. A frozen drizzle rained." She becomes cold with the weather, and her coldness threatens to freeze the blood in the veins of her lover, so that "to sleep with her was to shiver all night and to feel, little by little, the blood, bones, and thoughts freeze."

With the loss of warmth and sunlight, the wave can only dream of heat and light, suffering "deliriums of the sun, of burning beaches." She begins to have nightmares of freezing in darkness: "She dreamt of the pole and of changing into a great block of ice, sailing beneath black skies on nights as long as months." In her anger and misery, the wave becomes "charged with electricity," as a stormy sea wracked by lightning; the fire that once expressed the wave's passion for her lover becomes a destructive electrical storm that "carbonized everything she touched."

Even the laughter that once delighted the narrator turns menacing as his relationship with the wave becomes antagonistic. When he dives into the water to attack the fish, "she laughed and pounded me until I fell" and almost drowned. Yet, even in his fear and hatred of her, he finds her voice seductive; after she almost drowns him, "her voice was sweet."

After the narrator begins to neglect their relationship, staying away from home and socializing with old friends, the wave's anger and misery erupt into a series of dark and menacing sounds. She "screamed every night." In the daytime, she "endlessly howled," and "isolated herself, quiet and sinister, stuttering a single syllable, like an old woman who mutters in a corner." Again, the laughter with which she fills the house becomes threatening and demonic, rather than loving and joyful: "She insulted me. She cursed and laughed, filled the house with guffaws and phantoms." Likewise, the fish, her allies, "laughed with their ferocious grins."

After the narrator leaves for a month, he returns to find that the warmth of love and passion which once illuminated the wave has turned to ice: "It had been so cold that over the marble of the chimney, next to the extinct fire, I found a statue of ice." The "extinct fire" in the fireplace represents the fact that the fire of love and passion between the narrator and the wave has been extinguished. The narrator coldly sells the frozen wave to a restaurant to be chopped into little pieces and used to cool drinks; the waiter puts the chopped ice "in the buckets where bottles are chilled." It is significant that the very last word of the story is "chilled"; the love and passion between the narrator and the wave has completely "chilled," gone cold and dark, lost all warmth and light.

Paz makes use of a rich array of descriptive language in "My Life with the Wave" to portray contrasting sounds, sensations, and imagery, making tangible the development of a romantic relationship from love, passion, and joy to hatred, anger, and fear.

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on "My Life with the Wave," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Hart is a freelance writer and former editor of a literary magazine. In the following essay, she takes Octavio Paz's concept of love as stated in his book The Double Flame *and imposes it on his metaphoric narrative in his short story.*

In "My Life with the Wave," Octavio Paz describes a brief and turbulent but, at the same time, sensual and erotic love affair. The male participant of the love affair appears to enter into it with great reluctance and to leave it with a sigh of relief. These are not the kind of ingredients that many people want to read about in relationship to the workings of a love affair; but these are the ingredients that Paz wants to describe. Paz may be very erotic in his writing about these two lovers, but he is no romantic. His concepts of love can be as harsh as the "repulsive and ferocious" fish (with their "jagged and bloodthirsty mouths") that the narrator of "My Life with the Wave" brings to his lover to keep her company. But no matter how deeply the narrator falls into the ecstasy of erotic lovemaking, Paz does not allow him to forget that love is a two-faced entity. As the narrator states in *The Double Flame,* "love is twofold: it is the supreme happiness and the supreme misfortune." And "My Life with the Wave" is a metaphor for both of love's faces.

In the first paragraph of his story, Paz's narrator describes his initial introduction to his wave with words like: shame, furious, paralyzed, impossible, gravely, harshness, and irony. So even at the preliminary hint of what kind of story this is, Paz declares that it definitely is not going to be a story about a normal love affair. But then, how could a love affair with a wave be normal? However, even as a metaphor, Paz indicates immediately that his concepts of love are in no way seen with a quixotic, or unrealistic, vision. For in his *The Double Flame,* Paz says that love is time, and as time, love is "doomed to die or be transformed into another feeling." Love, as Paz would tell it, sounds like trouble. As the story proceeds, readers become aware that this narrator is well aware of Paz's wisdom, for no later than the second paragraph, the narrator confesses that as soon as the second day of his friendship with the wave, his troubles had already begun.

The narrator, from the very beginning, tries to rid himself of the wave. He does not want to become involved. Maybe he's experienced this before, and doesn't want to again. Or maybe the freakish nature of this mysterious thing frightens him; maybe he doesn't even like this wave that forces him to do things like break rules that have not even been written, as when he tries to take her on the train. It is on the train that he realizes that there are no rules written about taking a wave on a train. This alone proves the ill-fated nature of the affair, or as the narrator puts it, this proves "the severity with which our act would be judged." And the narrator's fears are justified, as he soon finds out. Society is suspicious about things that deviate from the normal— and most people would agree that having a wave as a friend is a bit bizarre. So the narrator does his time in jail for having tried to poison innocent children with thoughts that run counter to their innocence. Or more specifically, he goes to jail for poisoning the water. After all, a drinking water fountain should produce a drinkable liquid, not one tainted with salt. Who wants to drink water that tastes like tears?

The narrator goes to jail for befriending a wave. And when his jail sentence comes to an end, he returns to his home and discovers a strange thing: the exotic, as well as erotic pleasures of his new friend, the wave. After having spent a year in jail, the narrator's wave is looking a lot different to him, now. Maybe she is not as frightening as he once thought. As a matter of fact, the narrator makes the bold statement that "her presence changed my life." He has, it is easily noted, completed a most dramatic transformation.

"Lovers pass constantly from rapture to despair, from sadness to joy, from wrath to tenderness, from desperation to sensuality," writes Paz in *The Double Flame,* as the "lover is perpetually driven by contradictory emotions." And so from fear of breaking unwritten laws, from shame and harshness, the narrator moves to a place that is filled with "air, with sun, with green and blue reflection." Everything in his life is filled with the colors and sensuality of the wave, the ocean. "Everything began to laugh." The narrator has committed himself to playing the game of love. He has shed his grave thoughts and has found himself on the upswing of the wave, the upswing of emotions as he and the wave kiss and caress, as he "plunges into her waters."

It is not only the narrator who has gone through a transformation, for the reader is told that the wave, too, has changed. She is now "humble and transparent ... calm water ... so clear I could read all of her thoughts." Paz then shows glimpses of the erotic as the lovers lose themselves in the rapture of love-making with the swells and the falls of the tides. They have enclosed themselves in a world that allows only the two of them to enter. This is the time that Paz describes as the point where lovers lose themselves as persons and recover themselves as sensations. "As the sensation becomes more intense," he writes in *The Double Flame,* the lovers reach "a sensation of infinity," which he likens to "a fall into an ocean" that enfolds the lovers "in primordial waters."

But Paz knows this will not last. He does not allow his story to progress very much beyond the description of the first orgasm, before his narrator declares that the wave also reveals a side that is "black and bitter." For the narrator, it appears that the sun is setting and the tide has gone out. His lover begins to complain. He tries to appease her. But as Paz sees it, love changes, so much sometimes, that it can become boring. And this is where the narrator confesses that he brought in those nasty fish and then found himself writhing with jealousy because she preferred the fish to him. So riled is he that he tries to kill the fish. In the end, it is he who almost drowns, but the wave saves him. But she saves him while telling him about "the delicious death of the drowned." He becomes not only frightened, but his lust for her has been turned into hatred.

Despite all the twists and turns of love, all the contradictory emotions, says Paz in *The Double Flame,* "despite all the ills and misfortunes it brings, we always endeavor to love and be loved." Paz goes on to explain that every culture has a story that is similar to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. Every creation myth has some kind of original couple who lives in some kind of paradise. This worldly paradise represents a place of innocence, a place in harmony with itself and with the whole of all that is. Upon birth, Paz continues, people feel torn away from the whole, this place of paradise, and it is through love that people try to return, if only for a quick glimpse or a reminder of what once was. Every pair of lovers tries to "reinvent the original couple." Paz states that the

psychologist Sigmund Freud referred to this sense of paradise as the "'oceanic feeling,' that sensation of being enveloped in and rocked by all of existence."

The narrator, this man who was momentarily convinced that he could return to paradise and who thought the wave could tell him secrets that no mortal could reveal, ends up fearing and loathing her. He awakens one day and sees her for what she is: a demanding thing, who curses him, who defies him, who is constantly changing her moods. She is no closer to paradise than he is. And even if she were, was it worth his life to hope for those few fleeting moments of ecstasy? The narrator thinks not. He has other things in life to do. He remembers that there are other things in life besides the erotic bliss one might discover in love. And the other things, in comparison, are so much easier.

So he decides to return to his life as it was before he met the wave. He returns to his friends and family. He also turns to a more mortal woman, a compatriot in the politics of a less passionate world. "But what could a woman, master of a limited number of souls and bodies, do, faced with my friend who was always changing—and always identical to herself in her incessant metamorphoses." In other words, this normal woman was no more capable of helping him than he was of helping himself. They were both just as weak and ignorant in the affairs of love. And the wave, in Paz's metaphor, is definitely representative of the affairs of love, the powers of love, the moods of love, and the ills and misfortunes of love.

The wave represents the primordial ocean to which all humans crave to return. The wave is the original wholeness. This power of love, this desire to return to the whole through the beloved is a theme that Paz returns to in much of his writing. "My Life with the Wave" demonstrates the difficulties in that attempt. And so the narrator stays with the wave until winter is well in play. By now, the wave has grown cold, like the winter wind or the frozen rain. She grows so cold, that the narrator has trouble even sleeping next to her. So he withdraws from her. He even withdraws from his house for more extended lengths of time. Her arms, in which he had once laid, had turned into "knotty cords that strangled" him. Love has turned her head, and all the narrator can see is the face that is named misfortune. And so he flees.

The narrator rejects love. He desires only the gentle face, the face that beams upon him like the sun in summer. He loves riding the wave as long as there are no storms churning her waters. He does not possess the patience or understanding that storms pass and that seasons change, returning once again from winter to spring and back into summer. He is scared. He has seen his own death, and he fears it; and as Paz states, love makes one conscious of death so there is no escape. But the narrator cannot look into that face, so he runs. He runs to the mountains, to the solidity of earth where he "breathed the cold thin air like a thought of freedom." He makes a decision, knowing now that he must rid himself of love.

When he returns to his apartment, he finds that the wave has turned to ice. The narrator's voice sounds tired. As in the beginning of the story, he has returned to a vocabulary of an apathetic man. He is weary and unmoved. The fire in his fireplace is

extinct. He talks of slabs of marble and statues, cold and unfeeling things. And he refers to his former lover as the "sleeper," whom he has just bagged.

Then Paz does two interesting things. First he has the narrator not only give her away in order to be rid of her, but rather the narrator sells her. He actually makes a profit off of her in addition to gaining his freedom. The wave might be frozen, but it is the narrator whose heart is cold. But nonetheless, Paz then has the waiter, who has bought her, chip her up into small cubes. She is used to chill bottles of wine. In this way, by chilling the wine, she herself will be melted. When she melts, she will be flushed down the drain. Although she will rush through the sewers, she eventually will be absorbed by the land, drained into some underground river, and eventually make her way back to the ocean. She will return to the "whole," to her source.

But where will the narrator go? Where will he spend the small change that he made off this wave who tried to teach him to love? Paz does not offer any answers. Instead he portrays a restless man, either forever searching for a few moments of erotic ecstasy through a constantly renewed list of female companions, sighing sexual sighs in the summer; or mumbling and grumbling through the winter about the demands of love and the need for solitary freedom. Paz knows that love is full of irony. He knows that those few moments of bliss, if that is how he chooses to define love, are worth the torment. He also knows that the beloved represents something that is so enormous, so universal, so hard to define that he makes statements like this: "That is why poetic images transform the beloved into nature—a mountain, water, a cloud, a star, a wood, the sea, a wave." Love is complex. It also can be very difficult to deal with. But love is a natural condition, Paz seems to say with this story. And come summer, who doesn' t think that the narrator in "My Life with the Wave" won't be down on that beach, staring out into the ocean, once again looking for that wave?

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "My Life with the Wave," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review of Eagle or Sun, *Christ calls "My Life with the Wave" a "breathtaking success."*

Octavio Paz is Mexico's greatest living poet. But let's face it: that's like saying William Carlos Williams was Paterson's best writer. For Americans, a better way of indicating Paz's importance will have to be found. Perhaps it would be more suggestive to say that in the universe of Latin American writing, Neruda's poetry is solar: a lavish, Hispanic fulmination—like a Tamayo watermelon—and Paz's poetry lunar: a rarer, Gallic luminosity—like a Magritte moon—; or, to put it another way, to say that while Neruda is directly concerned with the world, its objects and processes (including poetry), Paz is more frequently concerned with poetry, its procedures and words (meaning things).

But let's really face it: Paz is an even better essayist than he is a poet. His 1950 evocation of Mexican character and culture, *The Labyrinth of Solitude,* is, in fact, devoted to the real world and it produces an astonishing image of a whole nation, truer than the profound truths it reveals for presenting them in a mythos made entirely beautiful. Written in a lucid, rich prose, *Labyrinth of Solitude* is Paz's poetic masterpiece. And his volume of poetics, *El arco y la lira* (still untranslated) is more indispensable and uniquely expressive than much of the poetry he has written. So we confront a major poet who writes invaluable prose, and that's exactly where *Eagle or Sun?* comes in.

Eagle or Sun? was published one year after *Labyrinth of Solitude,* and, as its title signifies, the book continues Paz's search for Mexican identity. (The title images refer to the obverse and reverse of a Mexican coin; the title poem explains: "Today I fight alone with a word. That which concerns me, to which I concern: heads or tails? eagle or sun?") But the book also continues Paz's vacillating search for his authorial identity, and he might just as well have written: "Today I fight alone with a form. Heads or tails? prose or poetry?" because *Eagle or Sun?* is a series of short prose poems (miniature, highly imaginative *essais,* really) marking a crucial instance in Paz's career where he has consciously tried to dissolve the images of his poetry in the fluid of his prose without sacrificing the nature of either.

Eagle or Sun ?, then, is a significant experiment in the career of a significant poet, and its longest piece, "My Life with the Wave" (which tells of a man's falling in love with a wave, his taking her home and the tides of their affair until she freezes in his absence and he sells her to a waiter who chops her up into little pieces to chill bottles) is a breathtaking success. It is a fantasy as delicate as anything by Hans Christian Andersen or Perrault, as magical as anything by André Breton or Dali and as beautiful as anything else by Paz. "My Life with the Wave" alone justifies the experiment and the volume.

For the most part, however, this book is the self-referring self-scrutiny of an intense artist using prose to make words into things ("a bit of air in a pure mouth, a bit of water on greedy lips") as he stands in awe of things made into poetry ("the cantos of sand ... said by the wind a single time in a single interminable phrase, sourceless, endless,

senseless"). Like so much contemporary art, *Eagle or Sun?* is self-consciously about itself; but, for a change, intelligently, illuminatingly so. Thus it is not a carefree volume, because Paz explains that "Every poem is made at the poet's expense"; and while it sings the pain of creation—the Passion of Poetry, not the passion *in* poetry is Paz's theme—it also celebrates the poetic opportunity by rejoicing in the "World to populate, blank page," privileging us to witness a poet who can accurately say that "From my body images gush" while he gracefully avoids that modern literary pitfall, "a bramble of allusions, tangled and fatal." Of course everything in *Eagle or Sun ?* is not as good as "My Life with the Wave," but by pointing always in the direction of itself, the book establishes its own elevated norms and provides a fine introduction to all of Paz' s work.

Source: Ronald Christ, "Eagle or Sun?," in *Commonweal,* translated by Eliot Weinberger, April 24, 1970, pp. 23-24.

Adaptations

The video recording *Octavio Paz* includes Paz reading from his work, as well as interview material. It was produced and directed by Lewis MacAdams and John Dorr in 1989.

"My Life with the Wave" was translated and adapted as a children's story by Catherine Cowan in a 1997 book of the same name, illustrated by Mark Buehner. This adaptation was recorded on audiocassette by Recorded Books in 1998, narrated by Johnny Heller.

Topics for Further Study

Paz often addressed themes concerning the impact of the ancient native cultures of Mexico on twentieth-century Mexican culture and society. Learn more about the ancient civilizations of Mexico, such as the Aztecs and the Mayan peoples.

The work of Paz is often categorized with that of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda and Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes. Read a poem or story by one of these authors. What central themes does he address, and what stylistic elements does he employ? How would you compare the work of this author to that of Paz?

Paz was strongly influenced by the French literary movement of the post-World War I era known as surrealism. Read a section of *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (1924), by André Breton, the father of surrealism in literature. What are the basic tenets of surrealism? Can you write a surrealist story or poem, according to the principles put forth by Breton?

"My Life with the Wave" was adapted as a children's story by Catherine Cowan in a 1997 book of the same name, illustrated by Mark Buehner. Try adapting another short story (or "prose poem") from Paz's collection *Eagle or Sun ?* (or a short story by a different author) as a children's story. What elements of the original story did you alter in the course of adaptation?

Compare and Contrast

1876-1911: In 1876, Porfirio Diaz leads a revolt against the Mexican government, and assumes the post of President. The Diaz regime, which dominates Mexican politics for the next thirty-five years, is known as the Porfiriato.

1910-1917: The Mexican Revolution deposes Diaz in 1911 and institutes the Constitution of 1917, which calls for many reforms.

1945-1981: During the post-World War II era, Mexico enjoys a period of political stability.

1994: A rebellion lead by the Zapatista National Liberation Army erupts in the south of Mexico; rebels demand increased social services for the Indian population of Mexico.

1936-1939: The Spanish Civil War is fought between the Republican government and the Nationalist rebels. The Nationalists win the war and place the military leader Francisco Franco as head of the country.

1939-1975: Franco rules as dictator of Spain from the end of the Civil War in 1939 until his death in 1975.

1975-2000: After the death of Franco, Spain is democratized, becoming a constitutional monarchy.

 1939-1945: In 1939, France declares war on Germany. In 1940, France agrees to occupation by Nazi Germany during World War II. The French government under Nazi Germany is known as Vichy France.

1945-1958: The end of World War II and of Nazi occupation leads to the formation of a Fourth Republic of France. It is during this period that Paz holds the post of Mexican cultural attaché to France.

1958: A military coup in French colonial Algiers leads to the end of the Fourth Republic. The Fifth Republic is headed by General Charles de Gaulle.

1981-1995: The election of François Mitterrand ushers in a Socialist presidency in France, which lasts through two terms. In 1995, Jacques Chirac is elected President of France, ending the fourteen-year period of Socialist rule.

What Do I Read Next?

Manifestos of Surrealism (first published in 1924) was written by André Breton, the father of surrealism in literature, and presents the basic tenets of the French surrealist movement in literature.

The Labyrinth of Solitude (1950), Paz's most celebrated work, is a long essay on Mexican culture that focuses on its roots in the ancient history of native Indian civilizations combined with the influence of Spanish colonization.

lAguila o sol?/Eagle or Sun? (1951), by Octavio Paz, is a collection of prose poems concerned with Mexican history and culture and the role of the poet in modern society.

Burnt Water (1980), by the celebrated Mexican novelist and short story writer Carlos Fuentes, is a collection of twelve stories first published between 1954-1980.

Selected Poems (1990) is a collection of poetry by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, perhaps the most celebrated Latin-American poet of the twentieth century.

Further Study

Brandon, Ruth, *Surreal Lives: The Surrealists, 1917—1945,* Grove Press, 1999.

Brandon provides a history of the French surrealist movement in literature and the arts.

Longhena, Maria, *Ancient Mexico: The History of the Maya, Aztecs, and Other Pre-Columbian Peoples,* Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1998.

Longhena presents an illustrated history of the native cultures of ancient Mexico.

Paz, Octavio, *Sun Stone,* translated by Muriel Rukeyser, New Directions, 1963.

First published in 1957, *Sun Stone* is a long poem that is considered Paz's greatest poetic achievement. The title refers to the ancient Aztec calendar, and combines elements of personal remembrance, historical events, and mythological traditions.

Quiroga, Jose, *Understanding Octavio Paz,* University of South Carolina Press, 1999.

Quiroga provides a critical introduction to the major works of Paz.

Reavis, Dick J., *Conversations with Moctezuma: Ancient Shadows over Modern Life in Mexico,* Morrow, 1990.

Reavis provides an assessment of the lasting impact of the native cultures of ancient Mexico on Mexican society, culture, and politics in the twentieth century.

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"Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz Dies at 84," in *Los Angeles Times,* April 20, 1998, p. A18.

Ortega, Julio, "Notes on Paz," in *Octavio Paz: Homage to the Poet,* edited by Kosrof Chantikian, Kosmos, 1980, p. 124.

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Phillips, Rachel, *The Poetic Modes of Octavio Paz,* Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 58, 69.

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Wilson, Jason, *Octavio Paz,* Twayne Publishers, 1986, pp. 57-59.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) 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, SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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

SSfS 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 Short Stories 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 SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS 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 Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories 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 SSfS 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.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories 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 SSfS, 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 Short Stories 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 SSfS, 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 Short Stories 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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