A Narrow Fellow in the Grass Study Guide

A Narrow Fellow in the Grass by Emily Dickinson

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" is believed to have been written in 1865. A year later, it was published anonymously under the title "The Snake" in a journal called the *Springfield Republican.* The natural world is portrayed vividly throughout Dickinson's work, and this poem closely examines one of nature's most infamous creatures, the snake.

The poem begins with a description of the shock of encountering a snake. Although the poem's speaker never actually uses the word "snake," the scene is familiar enough for most readers to relate to it. The snake is almost magical as it moves, ghost-like, through the tall grass. The speaker sees only flashes of the snake's scaly skin, but there is evidence of its presence as the grass separates in its wake.

The poem goes on to illustrate how snakes can be deceptive. The word "barefoot" makes the speaker seem even more vulnerable to the serpent's potential threat. Mistaking a snake for the lash of a whip on the ground, the speaker reaches down to grab it and is startled to see it slither away.

The snake, one of the most notorious creatures in the natural world, has long been a symbol of treachery. Although the poem's speaker claims to be a lover of nature, it seems that the snake, while fascinating, is impossible to love. In fact, the speaker reacts to the snake as if it were a living manifestation of the terror of the unknown, for it is both startling and chilling.

Author Biography

Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1830 and lived there all her life. Her grandfather was the founder of Amherst College, and her father Edward Dickinson was a lawyer who served as the treasurer of the college. He also held various political offices. Her mother Emily Norcross Dickinson was a quiet and frail woman. Dickinson went to primary school for four years and then attended Amherst Academy from 1840 to 1847 before spending a year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Her education was strongly influenced by Puritan religious beliefs, but Dickinson did not accept the teachings of the Unitarian church attended by her family and remained agnostic throughout her life. Following the completion of her education, Dickinson lived in the family home with her parents and younger sister Lavinia, while her elder brother Austin and his wife Susan lived next door. She began writing verse at an early age, practicing her craft by rewriting poems she found in books, magazines, and newspapers. During a trip to Philadelphia in the early 1850s, Dickinson fell in love with a married minister, the Reverend Charles Wadsworth; her disappointment in love may have brought about her subsequent withdrawal from society. Dickinson experienced an emotional crisis of an undetermined nature in the early 1860s. Her traumatized state of mind is believed to have inspired her to write prolifically: in 1862 alone she is thought to have composed over three hundred poems. In that same year, Dickinson initiated a correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the literary editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine. Over the years Dickinson sent nearly one hundred of her poems for his criticism, and he became a sympathetic adviser and confidant, but he never published any of her poems. Dickinson's isolation further increased when her father died unexpectedly in 1874 and her mother suffered a stroke that left her an invalid. Dickinson and her sister provided her constant care until her death in 1882. Dickinson was diagnosed in 1886 as having Bright's disease, a kidney dysfunction that resulted in her death in May of that year.

Poem Text

A narrow Fellow in the grass
Occasionally rides—
You may have met Him—did you not?
His notice sudden is—The Grass divides as with a Comb—
A spotted shaft is seen—
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on—He likes a Boggy Acre
A Floor too cool for Corn&mdasho;
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot—
I more than once at NoonHave passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled, and was gone—Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me—
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality—But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone—

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4:

In the opening quatrain, Dickinson cleverly disguises the subject of the poem, a snake. This creature sounds harmless enough as it is introduced in line one. The term "narrow Fellow" is a nice use of colloquial language, "narrow," meaning small in width as compared to length, and "fellow" being a familiar term for a man or a boy, with an undertone that suggests commonness. The choice of the word "rides" is also interesting because it sounds like "glides" and "writhes" but gives the impression that the snake is being carried, or that it is floating along. In addition, the word can also mean torment, harass, or tease, and this definition fits the snake's reputation as a sly tempter. The speaker goes on to ask readers if they, too, have ever encountered snakes, noting that these "narrow fellows" always seem to take people by surprise.

Lines 5-8:

This second quatrain vividly describes the way a snake moves through tall grass. In line one, the grass is compared to hair and the snake to a comb moving through it. In line two, only part of the snake is seen, "a spotted shaft." The snake is long, slender, and marked with spots, and it is quickly glimpsed as it passes at the speaker's feet. After the flash of snake, the grass closes up and then is "combed" apart again as the snake moves on. There is something invisible, or ghost-like, in the way the snake slithers along, for the creature is mostly unseen but evidently there.

Lines 9-12:

The snake likes "boggy," or wet and marshy, land. Corn grows best in hot, dry soil, so the snake's favorite environment is not suitable for growing corn. The speaker goes on to reminisce about one of many childhood encounters with a snake during a morning walk. The speaker's detail about being barefooted is particularly provocative, for the thought of a snake slithering across one's naked extremities would make most people cringe.

Lines 13-16:

In these lines, the speaker continues the description of the childhood encounter. While walking along, the speaker sees something that appears to be a "Whip lash," or flexible part of a whip, "unbraiding," or coming apart. The lash of a whip is often made of braided pieces of leather, so the speaker might have thought that the Whip lash was disintegrating because it had sat so long in the harsh sunlight. The speaker recalls being well deceived by the snake. The speaker bends over the supposed "Whip lash" in order to pick it up, when it is suddenly metamorphosed in to a living creature that

"wrinkled," or crumpled and folded, and then slithered away. Oddly enough, a colloquial definition of the noun form of "wrinkle" is "a clever trick." In a sense, the speaker was tricked by the snake, for it was not what it appeared to be.

Lines 17-20:

In this quatrain, the poem's speaker claims to be familiar with some of "Nature's People," or animals, and they with the speaker. The speaker seems to feel a real closeness to these creatures, referring to this connection as a "transport," or strong emotion, "of cordiality," or of warm friendliness.

Lines 21-24:

The snake appears to be the one exception to the opinion described in quatrain five. Every encounter with a snake, whether a shared or solitary experience, is a moment of shock and fear. "Tighter breathing" refers to an attack of panic, in which the heart races and breathing becomes strained. Most people who have ever been startled can relate to the sensations of this description. The final line contains a brilliant metaphor, for the term "Zero at the Bone" describes both bone-chilling terror and absolute nothingness. This final quatrain strongly suggests that the snake, who is casually referred to as a harmless, "narrow Fellow" in the first quatrain, might possibly be a manifestation of deception. The speaker, who loves all creatures, cannot love this treacherous trickster, the snake in the grass.

Themes

Appearances and Reality

"A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" is built around the contrast between what appears to be and what is. Dickinson wrote several "riddle" type poems, where she uses an extended metaphor to compare her subject to something, without coming right out and telling the reader what she is describing. Each stanza offers "clues" in the form of imagery, vivid word pictures such as the "spotted shaft" that divides the grass "as a comb."

Dickinson describes her object—in this case a snake—by hinting at what it resembles. The speaker falsely recognizes the object, taking it for something else. There is a split between what it appears to be and what it actually is. This theme of appearances versus reality comes through most strongly in the fourth stanza. The speaker is recalling time spent walking through the grass barefoot. The speaker—a young boy—spots the snake in the grass, but perceives it to be the lash of a whip: "I more than once at Noon / Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash / Unbraiding in the Sun." But just as the speaker reaches down to grab the Whip, he discovers it to be a snake, which slithers away: "It wrinkled, and was gone."

What makes Dickinson's poetic technique interesting is that she avoids words we would normally associate with snakes, such as "slither," "scaly," "slide," "coil," or the traditional descriptions of snakes as evil, demonic, or Satan-like. She chooses instead unlikely images, calling the snake a "fellow" who "rides" instead of slithers, who "wrinkles" away. She makes the reader conscious of language and forces him or her to imagine something in a way that one would not intuitively imagine it. In this way, she calls into question what reality is, and how much appearance plays a part in what we imagine to be real.

Fear

"A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" starts out with an image that seems to evoke the opposite of fear. The "fellow" in the first line hardly seems fearful, especially since the word "fellow" evokes a feeling of familiarity and a sense of ease. By calling the snake a "fellow," Dickinson almost gives it a personality. It seems far from the imposing, fearful creature the snake has traditionally been thought to embody.

As the poem proceeds, the imagery continues to paint a picture of the snake as a harmless creature, one of "nature's people," with whom the speaker is well-acquainted. The snake is again called a "fellow" in the final stanza, but this time, the context is different. The speaker is revealing his fear of the snake. Meeting this creature, this "narrow fellow," either "attended or alone" causes "tighter breathing." It causes the speaker to feel "zero at the bone," or to be chilled to the bone. The final stanza describes an irrational fear. Literary critic Barbara Seib Ingold explains: "Irrational fears

arise from what we do not understand; it is the many things one does not understand about a snake that add to one's fear of snakes."

Perhaps the speaker is thinking of the venomous bite of the snake, or of the mysterious habits of the snake. Often a creature associated with fear, and at times, evil, the snake has a curious place in history. We might say that "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" is an exploration of fear, using the creature of the snake as a catalyst for that fear. This poem shows fear to be a complex emotion—an emotion that exists in balance with comfort, as is suggested by the characterization the fearful snake as a "fellow."

Style

Dickinson constructed the great majority of her poems around the short stanza forms and poetic rhyme schemes of familiar nursery rhymes and Protestant hymns. "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," for instance, is written in six quatrains, or stanzas of four lines each, rhyming only in the second and fourth lines. Most, but not all, of the rhythms are iambic, meaning the poem has regularly recurring two-syllable segments, or feet, in which the first syllable is unstressed and the second syllable is stressed. The first two quatrains of the poem are laid out in the hymn meter called common meter, alternately eight and six syllables to the line. But Dickinson narrows the pattern thereafter to sevens and sixes, alternately seven and six syllables to the line.

Dickinson made many deviations from the conventional exact rhyme used by her poet contemporaries. "Alone/bone" in the final stanza is this poem's single exact rhyme, with similar sounds in the stressed vowels and in subsequent vowels and consonants, but not in the consonants immediately preceding the stressed vowels. "Me/cordiality" in stanza five is a vowel rhyme, and the other end rhymes are half rhymes, also called imperfect rhymes, off rhymes or slant rhymes, as in "rides/is" where the rhyming vowels are followed by different consonants, or in "seen/on" and "sun/gone" where the stressed vowels are different, but followed by identical consonants.

Dickinson often used alliteration and other repeated vowel and consonant sounds within lines and across lines and stanzas as alternatives to formal rhyme. In this poem, for example, the repetition of the sound "s" suggests the slithering of a snake. Alliteration is used effectively in "Attended or alone" and "breathing/bone" in the final stanza. Note, too, the echoing consonant and vowel sounds in stanza three's "A floor too cool for corn," and the prevalence of the long "o" sound in the concluding stanza underscoring the word "zero."

Historical Context

Born in 1830, poet Emily Dickinson lived during one of the most tumultuous and—at the same time—booming periods in American history. At once turbulent and idyllic, the mid-nineteenth century saw the flowering of literature, along with the push towards creating a unique American literary identity. But it also saw a society on the brink of violence with the increasing debates over slavery and the continued encroachment upon and displacement of Native Americans. Ultimately, the country became embroiled in a massive Civil War, tearing it apart and creating a legacy of strained race relations for future generations.

Because she was secluded in her Amherst, Massachusetts, home, readers often falsely assume Dickinson was disconnected from the events of the day. On the contrary, Dickinson was an active reader, followed current events and was very much aware of the world around her. Dickinson scholars Peggy McIntosh and Ellen Louise Hart state: "We know that Dickinson was a cosmopolitan and eclectic reader. Her letters indicate that she read newspapers and periodicals, following closely local and national events and reading contemporary poetry and fiction as soon as it came into print." Although very few of her poems were published during her lifetime, Dickinson was a committed poet, writing, revising, sending poems to friends, reading other poets' works as soon as they came into print.

The publishing world was booming during the nineteenth century, with an increase in both literacy and printed material. According to literary critic Paul Lauter, in the first third of the nineteenth century, the number of newspapers in the country increased from about 200 to over 1200. The number of novels in print also increased, with "popular" type novels leading the way, usually appearing serialized in weekly or monthly papers and magazines. Not only was the country expanding westward, more people were becoming literate. Lauter states: "It was in the early nineteenth century that writing first became an available profession, not only for white gentlemen, but for others." While Dickinson did not gain fame as a poet in her own lifetime as many of her contemporaries such as Whitman and Poe did, her poetic sensibilities and feelings of fragmentation were integral to nineteenth- century literature as it stood on the eve of the modern world.

America was still a very young country in the early part of the nineteenth century. As a relatively new nation, it was important for America to develop a sense of identity separate from England. Thomas Jefferson espoused an agrarian society, a nation of independent farmers; this was more plausible in eighteenth-century America. But the urban population continued to grow in the 1800s as more and more immigrants came to the shores of America in search of a better life. America needed its own identity on the world stage.

While there were distinct literary and intellectual voices in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—poets Phillis Wheatley and Anne Bradstreet, the writings of Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, Thomas Paine, and the stories of Hannah Webster

Foster and Charles Brockden Brown, to name a few—America as of yet had no strong literary tradition it could truly call its own. Until, that is, the "flowering of literature," beginning in New England with poets William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Walt Whitman. The topics they wrote about ranged from the celebration of American history to the praise of nature. Another important literary and intellectual movement of the nineteenth century was transcendentalism, with writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau discoursing on nature and spirituality, on "transcending" the modern world by looking to nature. Emily Dickinson was very much aware of the literary boom; her style was shaped by the poetry of the day and, at the same time, was highly unique.

Literary energy was not limited to New England and intellectual circles of Harvard and Cambridge. There were many distinct voices and literary trends. The novel came into full force in the middle part of the century, with best-sellers such as Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* and Maria Cummins' *The Lamplighter*. Women's texts, often labeled "sentimental novels" were increasingly popular, and Nathaniel Hawthorne was quoted as referring to the "damn mob of scribbling women." Two interrelated issues, "the woman question" and the antislavery movement, achieved a great deal of momentum as white women and white and black anti-slavery activists teamed up to fight the dual oppressions of patriarchy and slavery. White and black women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, Frances Harper, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Sojourner Truth fought for the liberation from women's domestic sphere, where women were not allowed to vote, own property, or divorce their husbands, as well as the liberation from slavery, where women were held as chattel, forced to submit to their white masters. The nineteenth century was full of powerful rhetoric that lit readers and audiences on fire.

The mid-nineteenth century was a unique era. Along with strides made by white women and blacks was the continuous shameful treatment of Native Americans. The economy boomed, new inventions surfaced, cities grew, the world became more modern as the country became divided. Daily life became increasingly more fragmented as America moved away from the organic ideal of an agrarian society and towards a more urban one. This was Emily Dickinson's world, and although we look to her as an eccentric of her time, she was still very much a product of that time.

Critical Overview

Perhaps because it is one of only a few poems that Dickinson agreed to publish in her lifetime, "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" has received a great deal of critical attention. The famous critical biographer George Frisbie Whicher, in his *This Was a Poet*, writes of the poem's first publication in 1866. According to Whicher, no readers in Dickinson's day appreciated the poem's "quaint wizardry of precision," nor did her contemporaries seem to recognize "that nothing at once so homely and so unexpected, so accurate in image and so unpredictable in its aptness, had yet appeared in American poetry." In fact, Whicher, who calls the poem a "tiny masterpiece," goes on to point out that the only notable comment made about the poem was a question concerning how Dickinson, a woman, could have known that a boggy field was bad for corn.

Another critic, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, writing in her literary biography *Emily Dickinson*, praises "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" as "perhaps the most nearly perfect poem addressing a nature possessed of some compelling mystery." Wolff describes how the poem "moves the snake into some undefined psychological relationship with the speaker, a move away from simple realism toward a portent of danger." According to Wolff, the poem begins with the "civilized" experience of an adult describing the motion of a snake, "then moves beyond the boundaries of arable land, into the swamp where not even corn can grow." There, the speaker recalls the "more vulnerable" experience of encountering snakes as a frightened child. Wolff suggests that this terror of snakes formed during childhood experiences carries into adulthood, so that in the final stanzas the adult speaker is unable to see the snake as anything but "fearsome and chill."

A third critic, David Porter, writing in his Dickinson: *The Modern Idiom*, focuses his criticism of the poem upon the way that Dickinson uses language. According to Porter, Dickinson "shows us less the way a snake looks than how ingenuity can reanimate language and put it up to saying new things." Porter highlights Dickinson's peculiar use of the word "narrow," saying that it is an "unlikely quantification" for a snake, and goes on to point out how the whole poem is a "word performance" full of wonderfully surprising, unconventional language.

Criticism

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- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Ketteler has taught literature and composition, with a focus on nineteenth-century literature. This essay examines the poetic techniques Dickinson uses in "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" and the various levels of meaning embedded in the imagery.

Emily Dickinson uses a medley of poetic techniques to craft her poem "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass." Throughout the poem, Dickinson balances the tension between the admiration of the object she describes—the snake—and the fear of it. "A Narrow Fellow" is in many ways a study in poetic technique, with carefully chosen images, instances of alliteration and rhyme, and the use of personification. Dickinson pays close attention to the look, shape, and sound of the words themselves, as well as the feeling created by the punctuation. "A Narrow Fellow" can be interpreted at several levels. First, it can be read on a literal level as a description of a snake. On a second level, however, Dickinson's imagery can be read as sexually nuanced. Reading the poem at these various levels creates ambiguity in the meaning. It also shows Dickinson to be ahead of her time in poetic technique, allowing "A Narrow Fellow" a more modern feel.

Very few of Dickinson's poems were published in her lifetime. "A Narrow Fellow" was one of about a dozen poems published in her lifetime, and scholars aren't sure if it was published with her permission or not, or even if she sought publication. The poem appeared on February 14, 1866, in the *Springfield Daily Republican,* originally titled "The Snake." "A Narrow Fellow" has received a good deal of critical attention, with literary critic Daniel Hoffman calling Dickinson's "Zero at the Bone" the finest image in American poetry (as quoted in George Monteiro's article). When reading this poem, it's important to look and listen closely to Dickinson's language, tone, images and use of punctuation. Dickinson was a poet who took risks. Biographer Paula Bennett explains: "Dickinson had to take risks—risks with her language and risks with her audience's willingness to play along. Reading her poem, we must think and see in new ways and entertain descriptions in wording, tone, subject and grammar for which conventional usage provides few, if any, precedents." This essay examines Dickinson's unconventionality, as well as some of the risks she takes as a writer.

The old adage that poetry is meant to be read aloud is appropriate for this poem. Dickinson uses the device of sound throughout the poem; hearing this poem is as important as seeing the words. Dickinson creates both a visual and an auditory image of the snake with her language. This begins from the very first line: "A narrow Fellow." Literary critic George Monteiro has looked closely at the sound devices Dickinson uses in this poem. He argues that the phrase "narrow fellow" "recreates, in a sense, the very movement of the snake as it 'rides' along the ground. The very size of the letters—all letters of a small size in the first word and an organized sequence of letters of a small and a taller size in the second word—orchestrate the poet's perception of the way this creature makes its way around."

The phrase "narrow fellow"—in addition to replicating the movement of the snake—also creates a very soothing sound that rolls off the tongue. Too, the word "grass" has a flow

and movement about it, and its "ss" ending could be said to mimic a snake's hissing sound. The "s" sound continues throughout the first stanza, with "occasionally rides" and "his notice sudden is." Even the look of the letter "s" itself is snakelike. Dickinson employs the technique of euphony, where the sound of words easily flows. Literary critic Barbara Seib Ingold, building on Monteiro's interpretation of the poem, writes: "The extensive use of long, resonant vowels and other soft, mellifluous consonants (l, m, n, r, v, f, w, th, and wh) throughout the poem gives it a euphonious sound." This euphonious sound no doubt sets the tone for the poem: calm, musical, almost Edenic. The speaker is comfortable with the subject, the "narrow fellow" that seems harmless and, in fact, graceful.

But the snake is elusive; it hides in the grass, flitting out of sight when the speaker spots it. The grass is conducive to the snake's movement; it "divides as with a Comb," creating an opening and closing movement. The fluid "s" sound continues throughout the second stanza, with such alliteration as "spotted shaft." Cynthia Griffin Wolff, a Dickinson scholar, writes about the snakelike quality of the letter "s" and the sound it creates in this poem: "Sinuous, serpentine movement is sustained for many lines by the insistent reiteration of the sounds." Also, the continuous dashes—an unconventional use of punctuation Dickinson is known for—keep the poem moving from one line to the next. The snake continues to move as well, coming into close proximity to the speaker: "And then it closes at your feet / And opens further on—." Throughout the poem, the speaker refers to the snake as "he." He starts out by calling it a fellow—a very familiar type of term. The snake begins to take on a personality as Dickinson uses personification to bring it to life. The personification is dependent upon the speaker feeling familiar and comfortable with the snake, which clearly he does. Dickinson also makes her speaker male, referring to him as a "boy" in the third stanza. These images of maleness will become important as we look at the poem in different ways later in this essay.

In the third stanza, we see another instance of alliteration, this time with the soft "oo" sound. Dickinson speaks of the boggy acre, or wet marshy land, that has a "floor too cool for corn." Again, the sound is fluid, and it is matched with the image of a cool, wet swampy floor and the snake "riding" through it. In this stanza, the speaker is recalling a childhood memory of watching the snake and not recognizing it. In the fourth stanza, he recalls a time he mistook the snake for a "Whip lash / Unbraiding in the Sun." The "s" sound continues as he tries "stopping to secure it," but it "wrinkled, and was gone—."

The image of a snake "wrinkling" suggests the snake was frightened by the approach of the speaker. "Wrinkle" hardly seems the graceful image of the grass dividing or the spotted shaft riding along the boggy acre. This characterization of the snake as a timid creature further develops the personification. In the next stanza, the speaker even refers to animals as "Nature's People," suggesting a kind of collective personification of animals. The speaker feels close to animals, feels for them a kind of "cordiality." The speaker makes this statement as a sort of caveat or disclaimer—this is understood in the final stanza when the speaker makes it clear that the snake, this "narrow fellow," is an exception to that safe feeling of comfort and cordiality.

In fact, the speaker's fear is exposed in the final stanza, leaving us with the final image of the speaker meeting the snake with a "tighter breathing" and a feeling of "Zero at the Bone." Ingold has remarked that this final image "vividly portrays the breathtaking, icy feeling that one experiences when faced with an irrational fear. When one reads these lines, the thought of being 'zero at the bone' causes one to feel coldness and to shiver." This immense feeling of fear contrasts with the rest of the poem; even the language changes. Dickinson moves from the soft "s" sounds and cool "oo" sounds with the hard sound of "z" in "Zero" and "b" in "Bone." This creates a cacophony, or harder, disjointed sounds. The fear of the speaker echoes through the final cacophonous sounds.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff has read this poem on a more symbolic level. She says: "Dickinson stipulates a man-and-boy for speaker, perhaps to emphasize the implications of male sexuality or even phallic brutality that the notions of a snake so often carries—implications that are reinforced here in part by the exposed feet and toes and in part by the 'whip lash' whose leather is quietly 'unbraiding in the sun' like a bundle of worms." Looking closely at some of the images in the poem, we can get an idea of what Wolff means by this. Snakes have long been phallic images associated with male sexuality; snakes have also been associated with danger, evil, and temptation. Even naming the snake a "narrow fellow" with a "spotted shaft" is sexually suggestive of male genitalia, just as the grass that divides, closing and then "opening further on" is suggestive of female genitalia. Wolff mentions the "phallic brutality" associated with the snake. Throughout the poem, the snake is referred to as a familiar "fellow." But suddenly, at the end, fear takes over and we're left with a sense of danger. Whether or not Dickinson was purposefully trying to link male sexuality to a sense of fear and danger, we'll never know, but the suggestion is there.

Writing about sexuality in the nineteenth century was not as taboo as we might think. Dialogs about sexuality were carried on in covert ways. Women, who were supposed to be pure and demure, couldn't be quite as open as men. After all, Walt Whitman, a contemporary of Dickinson, celebrated the body and wrote openly about sexuality&mdahs;both heterosexual and homosexual longings—in his poetry. And the anti-slavery movement often spoke of the horrors of rape and sexual violations black women endured at the hands of their masters. To speak so openly as Whitman was not Dickinson's style. Her poems are much more controlled, nuanced, and often cryptic. It is this ambiguity that gives her poems their depth. Her language is playful, but it is also doing serious things. Paula Bennett explains: "In the unconventionality of her grammar, as in the unconventionality of her thinking, Dickinson was striking at the foundations supporting Western phallocentric thought."

In other words, she was quietly challenging the values of her culture that prescribed certain roles for men and certain roles for women and little flexibility between them. This is not to say Dickinson was unhappy in her life, for there is much evidence to show that she was very happy and loved her home and her life in Amherst. But it is to say that Dickinson was a deep thinker, and she took risks with her poetry. Joyce Carol Oates, a writer and critic, sees Dickinson' poetry as exhibiting a kind of artistic tension. She says: "Art is tension, and poetry of the kind Emily Dickinson wrote is an art of strain, of nerves strung brilliantly tight. It is compact, dense, coiled in upon itself very nearly to the point

of pain: like one of those stellar bodies whose gravity is so condensed it is on the point of disappearing altogether."

Dickinson's poetic technique was very much an art form she worked hard to refine and hone. The tension in her poetry is still, as Oates say, "strung brilliantly tight" over one hundred years later. The modern reader can glean so much from Dickinson—whether or not Dickinson absolutely intended her poems to be interpreted in certain ways or not—because she leaves so much unsaid, and yet, says so much with so little.

Source: Judi Ketteler, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Bussey holds a Master's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and a Bachelor's degree in English Literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she analyzes Emily Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" as a nature poem containing metaphors that bring the reader new insights.

Emily Dickinson was a reclusive and mysterious woman who spent half her life in seclusion. Dickinson had a strong sense of her own spirituality even as a young woman. Before she reached twenty years of age, she left Mount Holyoke Female Seminary because she refused to join the Congregationalist church, which was heavily influenced by Calvinism. Unwilling to live the restricted lifestyle required by the church (which included, among other things, disapproval of reading novels), Dickinson returned home to her family. She, like Henry David Thoreau, simplified her life in terms of objects and duties. Her poetry testifies to her attention to spiritual matters, and although she did not participate in church services, she was a Christian, a belief that is reflected in her poetry. Her simple life enabled her to turn inward, observe nature, and write poetry daily as she liked.

Among Dickinson's daily tasks was tending her beloved garden, and many of her poems reflect this interest. Dickinson's poetry often describes natural images that lead to deeper insight, and the sparse structure and simple lines frequently belie complex and profound messages. She believed that wisdom was accessible through sense perception, and that if she gave her attention to nature, it would reveal itself to her. Because she wrote little poetry intended for publication, the act of writing poetry may have been a means for her to clarify for herself or at least privately honor what she had learned. "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" is a perfect example of a seemingly simple poem that contains many insights about the nature of life.

"A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" is typical of Dickinson's nature poetry because of its succinct presentation, by a detached observer, of the harmonious coexistence of different natural elements. In the first two quatrains (stanzas of four lines), the speaker describes the snake moving through the grass, neither apparently harming the other

A narrow Fellow in the grass
Occasionally rides—
.The Grass divides as with a Comb—
A spotted shaft is seen—
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on—

The snake is not hindered by the thick grass, nor is the grass permanently parted or flattened by the snake's movement through it. The middle stanza explains that the snake enjoys boggy areas, again illustrating the comfortable interaction of nature's creatures and environments. The snake also lies in the sun, a completely different environment from a bog, yet this, too, suits the snake very well. Dickinson writes:

I more than once at Noon
Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun □

The snake is disturbed only when a little boy reaches for him, suggesting that human interference disrupts the natural balance between the snake and his sunny environment ("It wrinkled, and was gone—").

Until the last stanza, the snake is depicted as a non-threatening creature. The speaker expresses thoughts with an almost childlike sensibility, which is another common feature in Dickinson's nature poems. The tone is one of discovery and delight, rather than fear and disgust, despite the subject being a snake. For Dickinson, creatures generally considered ugly or repulsive were deserving of poetry because they were part of the natural world. Subjects of her poems include a rat, a fly, a spider, a mushroom, a bat, and weeds. Dickinson's initial presentation of the snake as non-threatening is expressed by her reference to him as a "fellow," a congenial, light-hearted word often used to address a boy or man, or even a dog. In the middle stanza, the speaker says that the snake "likes" a bog, rather than using a more neutral term like "seeks out" or "prefers." By personifying the snake in this way, the speaker casts him as a creature with feelings, and feelings similar to our own.

The change of tone in the final quatrain can be accounted for in numerous ways, but two possibilities seem most worthy of consideration. One is that earlier in the poem the speaker seems to be reminiscing, but at the end the speaker moves into the present. The light-hearted tone and the mention of boyhood experiences in the middle stanza are consistent with the childlike sensibility of the poem. In the last stanza, the speaker uses the word "never," which includes not only boyhood, but also youth and adulthood. The fear of the snake expressed at the end of the poem may illustrate adult fears of things that seemed harmless in childhood. The loss of innocence educates a person and creates fear; in this case, fear of a snake. Dickinson writes:

But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone—

Here the poem shows its underlying complexity, developing the image of the snake to show more than one aspect.

A second way to interpret the shift of tone in the last quatrain is that it refers to the dual nature of living things. Throughout most of the poem, the snake is described in friendly terms, but at the end the snake's threatening aspect is revealed; the speaker describes the tightening chest and icy chills upon seeing one. Of course, from the beginning, the reader may be thinking about the slithery or venomous qualities of snakes that bring dread to most people. At the end, then, the reader is able to understand the speaker's anxiety when confronted with a snake. Readers can readily identify with the speaker, who is both intrigued and repelled by the snake. It is both threatening and non-

threatening, as are most living things. Wisdom comes from understanding both aspects of the snake and, by extension, the dual nature of all creatures. In fact, Dickinson hints at the dual nature of human beings by assuming a male voice when she writes in the middle stanza of her "boyhood."

Dickinson's use of the word "rides" in the second line also connotes duality. While the most obvious meaning of the word is emotionally neutral (the snake riding the grass in the same way a person would ride a horse), the word can also mean "harassing" or "irritating relentlessly." A careful reader may conclude that, although the grass is not harmed by the snake's presence, it is helpless under the snake's passing and is, in fact, temporarily ruffled. While not meaningful on a literal level, the grass's powerlessness to respond to the snake has implications on a metaphorical level.

Dickinson's nature poetry has retained its popularity because of its ability to use natural events and images to lead the reader to new insights. The snake's movement through the grass, which returns to its original state after the snake has passed, can be read as a metaphor for people's movements through life. People make decisions and carry out acts that make a difference or create a change, but such change is often temporary. Dickinson's point is not that life is futile, but rather that the snake gets what it needs from the grass without destroying it. Further, there is a lesson about the world's return to order. Although the snake parts the grass, the grass returns to its intended state afterwards. The use of the word "rides" to describe the snake's movement is intriguing because it is unusual, and because it conjures parallel images, such as a fish swimming through water or a bird flying across the sky. In each case, the medium through which the object moves is not destroyed. Dickinson's technique is subtle, but noteworthy. By introducing metaphorical language early in the poem, she encourages the reader to look beyond the immediate image to a larger pattern.

Dickinson also makes her imagery universal by not naming her subject. The word "snake" does not appear in the poem; although the reader is certain of the subject's identity, every mention of the snake ("fellow," "spotted shaft," "it") is non-specific. The speaker seems to have taken an assortment of recalled images of the snake and generalized them before beginning the poem. Barbara Seib Ingold of *Explicator* especially admired Dickinson's descriptions of the snake's attributes ("narrow," "spotted shaft," like a "Whip lash / Unbraiding in the Sun,"), and use of "s" sounds ("Grass," "His notice sudden is," "The Grass divides as with a comb," "Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash," "When stooping to secure it"), to convey the snake's identity. The poem's language conveys that it is about something more than a single snake, and even about something more than snakes.

"A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" was written in about 1865, by which time poets had been writing about nature for a very long while. Although some nature poetry is trite and unoriginal, great poets, such as William Wordsworth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Emily Dickinson, were able to maintain the appropriate spirit, energy, and function of such poetry. By providing interesting, familiar, and well-written descriptions, these poets show their readers the wonders of nature, which is much more effective and memorable than simply telling about them.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Drohan is a professional editor and writer who specializes in classic and contemporary literature. In the following essay, she explores Emily Dickinson's love of nature and her expression of its inherent contradictions and mysteries in "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass."

Dickinson composed over five hundred poems that examined the relationship between man and nature, a select few of which are categorized as anti-transcendentalist. This means a selection of her nature poems deals with ideas that are in direct opposition of transcendentalist poets, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and David Thoreau, who believed one could achieve a spiritual connection with nature. Dickinson departed from what she thought to be a simplistic view of nature to show that nature will remain forever elusive from any real under- standing or interpretation. Her unique ideas are represented most succinctly with "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass."

When the poem was published, Dickinson was tackling a well-worn literary subject. She certainly wasn't the first poet to explore nature in her work. By 1860, the subject of nature had been explored for hundreds of years. However, she succeeded in breathing new life into a tired concept. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a direct influence on Dickinson; however, she did not follow in his transcendental footsteps. Emerson put forth ideas and theories in his work *Nature* that proposed nature is not a mere commodity, but rather a path to divine truth. He truly believed he could uncover the real purpose and meaning of the natural world. Fellow friend and poet Thoreau also believed that by studying and exploring nature, one could find a moral illumination and discover divine truths. Together, they created the transcendental movement, which was exalted by some and criticized by others for its perceived criticisms of the Christian church.

While the transcendental poetry movement greatly affected the American literary world, Dickinson turned those ideas on its head by introducing a deep skepticism for the sentimentality that permeated the poetry in that movement. In addition, Dickinson lived an isolated life, surrounded by the natural world, giving her an opportunity to form her revolutionary perspective. Even though Dickinson did subscribe to a transcendental philosophy in some of her work, evidenced by poems that explored the mystical connection between man and nature, she took the idea one step further and created a doctrine that celebrated the unknowable mysteries of nature and therefore contradicted Emerson's theories.

"A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" asserts that while it is possible to be a part of nature, humans are inevitably outsiders who are allowed to observe it, but never understand its secrets. Dickinson did not randomly choose the snake as an emblem of nature. Rather, the snake, which is ripe with biblical references, is used to symbolize the idea that nature is capable of betrayal. The poem begins by placing the narrator in a field where he suddenly happens upon a snake making its way through the grass. The line, "You may have met Him—did you not?," implies that the sight of a snake will occasionally occur when one wishes to enjoy what nature has to offer. The snake rides on the ground

with ease, highlighting its rightful place in the natural world. However, the snake moves quickly and divides the grass "as with a comb." The grass "closes at your feet / And opens further on," thus mirroring the elusive quality of nature. Just as a snake only allows a mere glimpse of itself as it makes its way through the grass, nature, too, only reveals a part of itself to those who wish to know it. The next lines, "He likes a Boggy Acre / A Floor to cool for Corn," also reveals that the snake has access to and even finds pleasure in places too barren for other forms of life. Dickinson is ascribing a certain amount of superiority to the snake by saying it inhabits places the narrator will never know or understand.

The narrator in the poem then recalls a time when he was just a boy who walked barefoot in the field. By walking barefoot, the boy makes himself closer to nature but also more vulnerable to it. Dickinson seems to be saying that no matter how close the boy in the poem gets to nature, he will never be admitted into its spiritual realm. This point hits home in the following lines: "I more than once at Noon / Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash / Unbraiding in the sun." Because the boy perceives the snake to be a type of toy, at first, he believes he can participate or play with nature. However, the boy learns quickly that the closer he gets to the snake and, consequently, to nature, the more it eludes his grasp. As the boy bends down to "secure it / It wrinkled, and was gone." The frustration that exists in the ability to capture or touch the snake alludes to nature's indifference toward humans. The snake's actions, like nature, are unpredictable. Nature exists in its own world. It's cyclical, persistent, and stops for no one. It does not care whether or not it reveals its secrets to man. In fact, it has a distinct lack of conscience, and it probably prefers to retain its mysteries because therein lies nature's power.

As the poem continues, the narrator announces, somewhat proudly, that he is a friend of nature: "Several of Nature's People / I know, and they know me." This is a naïve statement to make because, in reality, the narrator can never "know" nature. At this point in the work, the narrator seems to be in a state of denial, as if he is trying to convince nature that he is a friend that can be trusted with its secrets. This idea is also indicated in the title of the poem. Calling the snake a fellow is not only an attempt to reduce the snake to anthropomorphism, but it also implies a certain amount of familiarity with the creature when, in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The narrator even goes so far as to say, "I feel for them [nature's creatures] a transport / Of cordiality." However, the narrator's generosity is a moot point as nature is clearly not interested in taking the time to accept his offer. In addition, the word "transport" is indicative of the constant change and mobility that is at the core of nature.

The last stanza of the poem further reveals the narrator's perspective. For the first time in the work, an element of fear is introduced. Up until this point, the narrator tried to capture or tame the spirit of the snake by turning it into a civilized, even friendly, creature. The tone of the poem also serves to startle the reader. Up until the last stanza, the work feels light and airy, as if Dickinson meant to celebrate the natural world. The abrupt change in tone at the end of the poem highlights how the narrator's instinctual feelings betray him, and the reader goes through an emotional transition as well. All of a sudden, the reader, like the narrator, senses great danger. While the narrator would like

to be a friend to nature, he cannot help but fear the sight of the snake and acknowledge its potential evil. It is common knowledge that the snake has the potential to inflict harm with its poison. In addition, a snake, because of its physical structure, can make a quick, unanticipated attack at any time, thus destroying the narrator's life and permanently ending his relationship with nature.

The narrator is unable to deny his fear because of his body's intense physiological changes. His feelings of terror are represented by "a tighter breathing" and a chill to the bone. It is further revealed that the narrator has always had these feeling when he encounters a snake. This statement implies that the narrator has been plagued by nature's inconsistencies all his life. Even if the narrator is accompanied by one or more friends, he is not able to abate his feelings of terror upon meeting a snake. The consistency of fear insinuates that the narrator is in a constant struggle with the mysteries of nature. He desperately wishes to uncover nature's secrets and continues to attempt to do so but fails to succeed in his mission. The narrator must face the reality of his situation as he can no longer pretend to be one with nature. Ultimately, he's an outsider who must give up the fantasy and keep a certain distance from nature. Ironically, if the narrator were to succeed in capturing the snake, he might be bitten and meet his demise. This idea implies that the closer one gets to nature, the closer one gets to death. Dickinson further confirms her anti-transcendentalist feelings by addressing the issue of mortality. Paul Ferlazzo believes that while romantic poet Walt Whitman believed death signaled unity with nature because his body would be buried in the dirt and then renewed, Dickinson thought that death signaled a complete disconnection with nature and, therefore, the end of her relationship with it. However, by closing her struggle with its mysteries, Dickinson may finally achieve a kind of freedom that was unattainable in life.

Source: Michele Drohan, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

Julie Harris reads selections by Dickinson in the audiocassette *Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson.* Produced by Caedom, 1960.

Come Slowly Eden: A Portrait of Emily Dickinson is a play by Norman Rosten. Produced by Dramatists Play Service, 1967.

Magic Prison is a classical music adaptation, inspired by Emily Dickinson's poems and letters. Produced by the Louisville Orchestra, 1971.

Glenda Jackson reads from Dickinson in the audiocassette *The Mind of Emily Dickinson.* Produced by Argo, 1977.

Emily Dickinson is included in *Voices and Visions,* produced by the New York Center for Visual History, 1988 which details the lives and poetry of thirteen major American poets.

Topics for Further Study

Dickinson describes a snake in this poem without ever calling it by name, but also without pretending that its identity is supposed to be a secret: this poem is not a guessing game. Write a poem in which you make your subject clear from the very start, so that there is no need to actually say what it is.

Compare this poem with William Blake's "The Lamb." What do you think is the attitude of each author toward her or his subject? Which author do you think loves nature more? Which author do you think is a more talented poet ?

Describe the setting of this poem—are there many or few of "nature's people" around for the speaker to be cordial with?

Compare and Contrast

1800s: In America, white women are not allowed to vote, own property or divorce their husbands, and until the Civil War, black women are held as chattel in slavery. The suffrage movement gains strength mid-century, especially after it joins with the anti-slavery movement. White and black women activists organize conventions—the most notable of which was the Seneca Falls Convention in 1849—where they deliver powerful speeches, drawing parallels between the enslavement of blacks and the domestic enslavement of white women. The ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment—which gives black men the right to vote—ultimately splits the civil rights movement from the women's movement.

1920: The Nineteenth Amendment grants white and black women the right to vote.

1960s and 1970s: The women's movement in the nineteenth century is known today as the first wave of feminism. In the 1960s and 70s, the second wave of feminism began, with such leaders as Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan and U.S. Representative Shirley Chisholm. Women fought to end discrimination, earn equal pay for equal work, and end feminine stereotypes which dictated to women their place was in the home.

Today: Many feminists argue we are experiencing a third wave of feminism, with many younger women involved (hence, the popular phrase "girl power"). While both the first and second waves of feminism saw tremendous gains for women, feminists today are still fighting many of the same issues, namely an end to gender discrimination, violence against women, and negative stereotypes of women.

1800s: When Emily Dickinson was writing in the mid-nineteenth century, American literature was still in the formative stages. American writers were trying to create a tradition of their own, separate from the British literary tradition. The early part of the century saw an increase in the printed word, with an explosion in poetry. "The flowering of New England"—as it is often called—was a more high-brow movement, appealing to the growing class of educated, middle- income Americans. But there had always been a steady stream of popular, or "low-brow," literature in the form of stories published in periodicals and newspapers. As the century wore on, the division between high-brow and lowbrow grew deeper. The best-selling novels and authors were not always the ones the majority of Americans were reading.

Today: The divisions between high-brow and low-brow literature are still very much with us. We have an established "canon" of literary classics that appear on college syllabi and in grade school and high school curriculum. We also have a great deal of "popular" or best-selling literature (although some authors do manage to achieve best-seller status and a place in the canon). Still, popular types of literature such as Steven King, Danielle Steel, John Grisham, or the scores of romance, sci-fi, mystery or other novels are often looked down upon by more "serious" academic scholars. Much like in the nineteenth century, it is a flourishing market for popular writers, especially with the

invention of the Web and the renewed interest in reading, with new bookstores and book groups popping up all the time.

What Do I Read Next?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was one of Emily Dickinson's chief influences. The collection *Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning,* published in 1900 in six volumes and edited by Charlotte Porter and Helen Clarke, serves as a good introduction to Browning.

An extensive anthology of women writers in English, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English,* edited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, includes fiction, poetry and prose by more than 140 female authors, including a biographical essay about Dickinson. Published in 1985.

A contemporary of Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman is perhaps best known for his collection of poems entitled *Leaves of Grass,* first published in 1855.

A popular novelist who made her living by writing, Fanny Fern (Sarah Willis Parton) was also a contemporary of Emily Dickinson. Her novel *Ruth Hall,* published in 1855, is about a woman succeeding in the male-dominated world of publishing.

Francis Ellen Watkins Harper was a nineteenthcentury African-American poet, active in the anti-slavery and women's movements. She published several collections of poetry, including *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854) and *Poems* (1871).

Further Study

Bender, David, et al., *Readings on Emily Dickinson,* Greenhaven, 1997.

This collection offers various critical perspectives on Emily Dickinson's life and poetry. Includes twenty different essays by various authors.

Dickinson, Emily, *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems,* edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Little, Brown, 1961.

An extensive collection of Emily Dickinson's poems. Also includes biographical information.

Krane, Paul, ed., *Poetry of the American Renaissance*, George Braziller Press, 1995.

This anthology contains a wide spectrum of nineteenth- century American poets, from lesser known authors such as Lydia Sigourney to well-known authors such as Edgar Allen Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Longsworth, Polly, *The World of Emily Dickinson: A Visual Biography,* W. W. Norton, 1990.

This visual biography is made up of an extensive collection of photographs and sketches from the life of Emily Dickinson, including pictures of Amherst, her home, her friends and family.

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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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