The Nerve Study Guide

The Nerve by Glyn Maxwell

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Contents

The Nerve Study Guide....1
Contents....2
Introduction....3
Author Biography....4
Plot Summary....5
Themes....7
Style....9
Historical Context....11
Critical Overview....14
Criticism....15
Critical Essay #1....16
Topics for Further Study....20
What Do I Read Next?....21
Further Study....22
Bibliography....23
Copyright Information....24

Introduction

Glyn Maxwell takes his readers to a very special place with his poem “The Nerve,” a spot on the edge of everyday familiarity. It is a lively position to take, Maxwell writes in his poem, when a person finds himself standing “suddenly very far” from what he knows. It is the excitement that comes from facing the unknown that this poem attempts to identify and encourages its readers to find.

Maxwell knows about standing outside his known parameters. He is a British citizen living in New England, facing a new culture and a new, though similar, language of expression. With this poem, he shares his feelings about what happens when a person “cross[es] a line” and sees life from a different, unexpected perspective. The experience can have several different consequences: some might be positive; others might not. “But you ought to recognise it,” says the poem.

“The Nerve” was published in a collection of the same title. In 2002, that collection was chosen by the *New York Times* as a Notable Book of the Year. The title poem reflects certain aspects of Maxwell's life in suburban New England, but the poem is not just about him. It could be about a man; it could be about a woman. It is about life, anywhere.

BOOKRAGS

Author Biography

Nationality 1: British

Birthdate: 1962

Glyn Maxwell, author of the poem The Nerve, is a multitalented writer well known for his plays, novels, and opera librettos. He is also a teacher and an editor. Of all his abilities, this award-winning author is most recognized as a gifted poet.

Maxwell was born in Hertfordshire, England, in 1962. He received his bachelor's degree from Oxford University. Shortly after graduation, Maxwell won a scholarship to Boston University and came to the United States to study poetry and theater under Derek Walcott. After returning to England, Maxwell worked as a literary reviewer and later as a visiting writer at Warwick University. Then, in 1996, he returned to the United States, after being offered a position at Amherst College in Massachusetts. Since then, he has taught writing at Princeton, Columbia University, and the New School in New York City. Since 2001, he has also been the poetry editor at the *New Republic*.

Tale of the Mayor's Son, Maxwell's first book of poetry, was published in 1990. Two years later, with the publication of his second collection, *Out of the Rain* (1992), Maxwell's works began to be recognized with honors. *Out of the Rain* won the Somerset Maugham Award, while *Rest for the Wicked* (1995) was short-listed for the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Whitbread Poetry Award. In 1998, Maxwell's collection *The Breakage* was also short-listed for the T. S. Eliot Prize as well as for the Forward Poetry Prize for best poetry of the year. Three of his books, *Boys at Twilight* (2000), *Time's Fool* (2000), and *The Nerve* (2002) have, at various times, all been chosen as Notable Book of the Year by the *New York Times*. *The Nerve* also won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, in 2004. In *The Sugar Mile* (2005), Maxwell imagines (in a long series of poems) a conversation that might have taken place between two expatriates from Britain who meet in a city bar.

Besides his poetry collections, Maxwell has also published two novels, *Blue Burneau* (1994), which was short-listed for the Whitbread First Novel Award, and *Moon Country* (1996). He has also had seven of his plays professionally dramatized and is working on his second opera libretto. Maxwell lives in the United States with his wife and daughter.

Plot Summary

Stanzas 1-3

Maxwell's poem □The Nerve□ begins with a reference to some ambiguous □rough shape,□ which is not explained fully. The reader is engaged by the intrigue of not knowing what the speaker is talking about, but there is no full engagement. The speaker could be talking about anything at this point. It is not until the second line that this □rough shape□ is given a little more detail. The meaning of this shape does not become too much clearer, but in attaching the phrase □your life,□ the speaker draws the reader immediately into the poem. The speaker is talking directly to the reader, making the reader feel as if he or she had better pay attention. The speaker continues with words such as □your town□ and □a dusty shop you pause in,□ constantly tugging at the reader to participate in this poem.

It is also obvious that it is not just the reader who is involved here. By the tone of the words, it is apparent that the speaker is talking about something that he himself has experienced. He understands the feeling of someone being □suddenly very far□ from what is known. He could not have stated this phenomenon unless he, too, had gone through it. Now not only is the speaker talking directly to the reader, he is also sharing something extraordinary with him or her. He knows what it feels like and tries to stir that memory in the reader by referring to childhood. □You found it as a child,□ the speaker states. This is as if he is asking: Don't you remember? Then the speaker gives an example from his own experience, one that could easily correspond to the reader's experience□playing around one's house and knowing the boundaries of safety, sensing that beyond those parameters lies the great unknown or, as the speaker states in the fourth stanza, □the world's end.□

Stanzas 4-6

Once the speaker rouses that memory of the unknown, that □breeze of being gone,□ he takes the reader more directly to the theme of the poem by mentioning □a single nerve.□ The speaker is not concrete in describing it, but rather comes to it obliquely. First it is □low down.□ In stanza 5, the speaker continues to throw out hints. The nerve □sags.□ That is all that the speaker is willing to give away. The rest of the definition is left to the reader. However, in the next few phrases, the speaker empathizes with the reader. He is sure that when the reader finds that nerve, he or she will be thrown off guard, be □chilled□ to have found it so suddenly. Then there is a slight admonishment. After all, the speaker relates, □you ought to recognize it.□ Since it was there when you were a child, you knew it once, the speaker implies. And now, the awareness of that nerve has returned, but it cannot be depended on. It may well □fail□ you □utterly.□ The speaker appears to be saying that if a person is suddenly awakened to the unknown, to a side of oneself that one was not aware of, it will possibly be a shock. This will change a person. That change, however, may not be for the best. It may all □go wrong.□

Stanzas 7-9

The speaker begins stanza 7 with the thought that the change, which a person explores in oneself because this nerve has been touched, may even betray, that is, "be Judas," the man who betrayed Christ. That is a serious affair. And some "others," whether they are family, friends, or strangers, will offer no support. They will be "mute," unaware of "your pain." Ironically, they will "assume they're safe with you." These others, who remain untouched, will think "you" remain the same as they are. Because they have not changed, they do not see the change in "you." They do not know that because of that nerve, the person being addressed is wandering in uncharted waters, exploring new fields beyond the usual boundaries.

Rather than panicking about this situation, which sounds rather unstable, the speaker turns the reader around. "Treasure the nerve," he tells readers. Despite the challenges and possible disorientation, "treasure its dis- / belief." Do not dwell in the land of safety, where everyone else lives. Strain to see through the known; reach for places that are "inhospitable." A place that has different rules might even be "unfair." The speaker is encouraging the reader to be strong, to go where others are afraid to venture.

Stanzas 10-12

Going toward the unknown, beyond the ordinary boundaries, past the safety nets of experience and well-worn belief, will have its challenges, the speaker warns. It will be a place of no set rules, "arbitrary." The reader may well have to endure pain and suffering, something that one will see coming and will think about before continuing on the journey. Choices will not be made for one. These are uncharted waters. The reader will have grave decisions to make. "You will face the choices that the nerve / has suffered." Those choices made, there are two possible consequences: "to be plucked" and "to have brought the soldiers running" or "to lie low" and "have perished years / ago." One is the consequence of love. The other is the consequence of fear.

Themes

Passion

When Maxwell urges his readers in his poem "The Nerve" to "cross a line" into the unknown, he might well be referring to coming alive with passion. Although there is also the sense of death in the poem, with such phrases as "a breeze of being gone," there is a stronger pull that suggests one should use that realization of death to live life to its fullest, in other words, to live with passion. If people get caught in believing that they will live forever, they may find that they are not really living at all. Life can become very boring, the speaker suggests, if one does not seize every moment as if it were the last. Through the poem, readers are encouraged to push themselves to the edge. That is where passion is found. Excitement flows through one's veins when everything feels new. To find the passion in life, one must clear the vision he or she has of life and must live in the present moment, where everything is fresh and new. The world of passion is one that the reader may have thought of as a child, when passion ran high and dreams were unlimited by social conditioning. Passion demands that one forgo the road that ineffectually promises safety. "For that act / of love," the poem states, one should be willing to endure whatever this path of passion might bring, despite its illogical rules and "inhospitable" circumstances. One should push beyond self-imposed or socially induced boundaries and wander to places "very far from what you know." These are all the ingredients of a passionate life, of someone who is willing to witness new and unfamiliar surroundings and experiences, despite the unexpected challenges that one may be forced to face. It is all worth it, according to the poem. One should "treasure the nerve" of passion.

Going against the Grain

Most people, the speaker of this poem suggests, live in a world of set rules and practiced patterns. They live, like children, in a fenced-in, small world. Although they may see the "next field," they are afraid to cross over the boundaries. They feel safe in this enclosed, familiar world, where experiences are predictable and sane. But that is not the world that the speaker lives in, and through this poem, the speaker urges his readers to go against that grain, to push themselves away from the masses of people who "are mute." By going against the grain and not following the crowd, the speaker does not promise an easy life but suggests that it will be better than living half-dead. Going against the grain is not a popular practice. Group psychology dictates that everyone huddle together for protection. This might work in some instances, but for an overall philosophy of life, the speaker of this poem believes that it is more stimulating and more promising to strike out on one's own, "where you will face the choices that the nerve / has suffered." The nerve is what keeps you alive, and that nerve can be found only by striking out on one's own path and not succumbing to the urge to do what everyone else is doing.

The Unknown

Many people have a great fear of the unknown, the speaker of this poem suggests. As children, many thought that by going past the boundaries that were set by their parents, they would come to harm. In childhood, the unknown may have been simply the neighbor's yard or a great wood behind the house. If children went beyond these boundaries into unfamiliar territory, they might have been punished with tighter restrictions, or they might have been told that they would be stolen away by a stranger. Some people still carry those fears with them as they adjust to adult life. Many people, the poem suggests, find a completely safe environment□or at least one that they think is completely safe□and they stay within parameters that they set for themselves. Their boundaries are reminiscent of those set by their parents or suggested by social standards, or at least what some people perceive to be socially correct. Because of their fears, they very seldom wander across those boundaries into the field of the unknown. Everything outside the familiar is frightening. But the speaker paints a very different picture of the unknown. Although he suggests that there is no promised safety and even talks of pain, he encourages his readers not to be afraid of the unknown. It might bring a world of new, □unfair□ rules and □inhospitable□ environments to those who wander too far, but pushing oneself into unfamiliar places and unknown experiences is the only worthwhile exploration that one can make in this life.

Style

Cadence

Maxwell's poem “The Nerve” is written in iambic feet, each foot containing first an unstressed syllable and then a stressed syllable. Note the word “perhaps” in the first stanza. The first syllable (per-) is unstressed, with the second syllable (-haps) receiving the stress. For people who speak English, iambic meter in poetry is the most natural rhythm. It is a rhythm most similar to the spoken language.

“The Nerve” is composed of twelve stanzas. Each stanza is a quatrain; that is, it contains four lines. The pattern of the rhythm is (with some exceptions) basically a first line of five iambic feet (a pentameter), a second line of three iambic feet (a trimeter), a third line of two iambic feet (a dimeter), and a last line of one iambic foot (a monometer).The use of iambic meter, because it most closely reflects natural speech, could have been chosen by Maxwell to project the overall conversational tone of his poem.

Tone

The tone of a poem is the perceived attitude that the author has toward his audience. With “The Nerve,” at times the tone is that of a friend, as if the speaker were talking to someone he cared about. He offers a personal experience to back up his beliefs of how one should confront life. There is no sense of his knowing more than the reader knows but rather that he would like to share something he has learned with a peer. He uses down-to-earth language and images, even to the point of explaining his ideas as those that a child naturally encounters. He also speaks of dusty stores, fields, and bars—commonplace environments.

The speaker's tone is also at times that of a teacher, encouraging and nurturing. This is evident in the phrases such as “you ought to recognize it” and “treasure the nerve.” The shortness of the stanzas is easily digested in a relaxed manner, as if the speaker were talking in a quiet, but reassuring voice. The vocabulary is simple, and there is only one allusion—to Judas—which is almost universally understood.

Enjambment

Enjambment is the continuation of the sense of a particular line (that is, the grammatical sense) beyond the end of the line. This might be done for a variety of reasons. One is for dramatic effect, creating a pause for the reader to reflect for a few seconds before continuing. Sometimes enjambment merely breaks the monotony of continually reading the same patterned meters of each stanza. In the first stanza of “The Nerve,” a slight enjambment occurs at the end of the first line. “Somewhere at the side of the rough shape” reads as if that were a complete thought. However, as readers go on to the

second line, they realize that it is not just some random �rough shape� that the speaker is discussing but rather the rough shape that �your life makes in your town.� Then, at the end of the first stanza, there is another, more dramatic enjambment that causes a fairly abrupt change in perspective. The last two lines of stanza 1 are these: �you cross a line, / perhaps.� That leaves the impression that the reader may or may not cross a line. That is one interpretation of what the speaker is saying. But continuing to the second stanza, the reader realizes that the speaker is really referring to the idea that the reader might cross this line, perhaps �in a dusty shop.� That changes the sense of where the speaker is going. Rather than questioning whether the reader is going to cross the line at all, the speaker emphasizes, in the second stanza, more or less that the reader will eventually cross that line and the only question is where this will occur.

A second dramatic enjambment occurs in the eighth stanza, between the third and fourth lines. Here the poet hyphenates the word *disbelief*. Although readers may never be certain why an author does one thing or another, one can make intelligent or intuitive guesses. Here, the reason might be that Maxwell wanted to stress the word *belief* rather than its opposite, *disbelief*. Of course, one can argue that the metric beat of the poem demanded this hyphenation, but someone else can argue that Maxwell could have chosen another word. It is easier to assume that he hyphenated this one on purpose. He used the hyphen to cause a brief stop, to throw the reader off just a little, to make an emphatic point.

Shape

The shape of Maxwell's poem is not based on grammatical construction. The first two stanzas, plus the first line in stanza 3, complete the first sentence. The second sentence ends in the middle of line 1 of stanza 8. And the third sentence continues to the end of the poem. The shape is determined by the cadence, that is, the rhythm of the stressed and unstressed syllables, and the poet's choice of how many metered feet will be contained in each line. By ignoring grammatical construction�in other words, not allowing a period at the end of a sentence to dictate the end of a line�the author has created a sense of flow, like a small creek making its way downstream around boulders and fallen trees. The shape reflects, in some way, the theme of the poem, as it provides a sense of pattern but takes the reader outside that pattern at the same time. The definitive shape is the quatrain, with its patterned lines. Still, the meaning of the poem lies past the quatrains, as it pushes through the empty spaces between the stanzas and continues beyond the normal boundaries.

Historical Context

Brief History of British Poetry

Maxwell comes from a very long line of British poets, who have influenced his writing. British poetry is traceable as far back as the seventh century. It was then that a monk known as Caedmon wrote a hymn in verse, the first known British poem. Although the date is still in dispute, one of the next surviving verses is the well-known epic poem *Beowulf*, written perhaps in the eighth century but possibly as late as the tenth.

Poetry continued to flourish in later centuries, as witnessed by the several surviving texts composed during the Anglo-Norman period of British history. Poems from this period include Layaman's twelfth-century poem *Brut*, written in a dialect of Middle English, as well as the Gawain poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, both dating to the fourteenth century. Poetry would change after this point in British history, as the language of the country went through a massive mutation, evolving into what would become the genesis of modern English. Geoffrey Chaucer, who would become the major poet of the Middle Ages, lived at this time. His central work was *The Canterbury Tales*, a story of thirty pilgrims who pass the time of their long journey by telling one another stories. Chaucer was a great influence on British poetry into the following centuries.

The next great period for British poetry was the era of Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled from 1558 to 1603. This was a period famous for lyrical songs. It was also a time that saw the development of meters in poetry as well as an emphasis on courtly poems. William Shakespeare wrote his sonnets in the late sixteenth century. Other poets of the Elizabethan era include Sir Walter Raleigh, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson. This literary period also saw the development of the metaphysical poets, who appealed to the intellect rather than to the emotions. Often associated with these poets were John Donne and John Milton. Alexander Pope followed, with his emphasis on satire.

The Romantic period coalesced at the end of the eighteenth century under the influence of the great poets William Blake, William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, George Gordon Byron, and John Keats, to name just a few. The Romantics moved away from the metaphysical emphasis and focused on emotions and the individual.

Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are Victorian-era poets, writing during the mid- to late nineteenth century. One of Tennyson's major works was *Ulysses*, which was published in 1842. While Robert Browning became rich after publishing *The Ring and the Book*, a long blank verse (a poem with no rhyming) in 1868, his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, became famous for her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

The most well-known of twentieth-century British poets include William Butler Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, Rudyard Kipling, and T. S. Eliot. During World War II and shortly

afterward, Romanticism was revisited and revised, and poets once again moved away from the rational and emphasized emotional reactions to life. This movement was best exemplified by one of Britain's greatest poets, Dylan Thomas. The latter part of the twentieth century saw an increased interest in poetry by women and by immigrants, especially from the West Indies. But general lack of publishing opportunities for poets has seen an overall decline in the publishing of books of poetry in the last decade, with poets having to turn to small presses and dealing with a less-than-enthusiastic public audience than poets of earlier centuries enjoyed.

W. H. Auden

Almost every time that Maxwell's poetry is discussed, a comparison is made to the British poet W. H. Auden. Maxwell himself has stated that Auden has a great influence on his writing.

Auden was born Wystan Hugh Auden in 1907. When his poetry collection simply called *Poems* was published in 1930, Auden was deemed one of the leading voices of his generation. He was often praised for his poetic technical precision and for his ability to write verse in a great variety of forms. He also was known for the way he was capable of bringing everyday events and vernacular, or everyday, language, into his poetry. His subjects also enjoyed a wide range, covering topics as different as social issues, science, and politics.

Auden was a great traveler, and his experiences in other countries provided him with a wealth of material upon which to draw. He explored areas throughout Europe, visited China and Iceland, and eventually settled in the United States. Like Maxwell, Auden wrote not only poetry but also plays, opera librettos, and essays; he also worked as an editor.

In 1996, Maxwell published, with his fellow poet Simon Armitage, the book *Moon Country: Further Reports from Iceland*, which covers a trip that the author made to Iceland, mimicking a similar trip that Auden had previously made. Maxwell's book covers the politics and geography of this country and is written in poetry and in prose. The trip was made in honor of W. H. Auden.

World Affairs at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

Maxwell's poem The Nerve might be interpreted in many different ways; still, one cannot help but wonder if the underlying tone of exploring the unknown was stimulated by the great sense of uncertainty that enveloped the world after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., in September 2001. Maxwell was living in Massachusetts at the time and often traveled to New York City to teach. The sense of fear and the mention of soldiers in his poem, as well as the statements that urge his readers to explore new beliefs and new rules, may have been an outcome of these horrific affairs that caught the world so totally off guard.

Before the attacks, awareness of international affairs among most American citizens was in decline. With the demise of a threat from the Soviet Union, many people in the United States enjoyed an undefined sense of security. There seemed to be no need to worry about attacks from any other country. The U.S. military represented the most significant force on the planet.

Then, on September 11, 2001, two planes flew into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. One other plane, several hundred miles south, plowed into the Pentagon. A fourth plane, which some believe was headed for the White House or the U.S. Capitol, had its mission thwarted by a group of brave airline passengers; this plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. Thousands of deaths occurred. And the world outlook changed.

The sense of security in the United States was shattered. Citizens realized that their country was not as isolated as many had previously thought. Their country was just as vulnerable as any other. Terrorists could strike anywhere. This realization brought with it a new fear. The familiar had been shattered, much as in Maxwell's poem. People had to change their beliefs and restructure their lives. The terrorists' attacks altered more than the skyline of one of the largest and most powerful cities in the world. They changed the world itself.

Critical Overview

"The Nerve" was published in a collection that bears the same title, and that book was chosen by the *New York Times* as Notable Book of the Year for 2002. In his review of the book, the *New York Times* writer David Orr finds that "Maxwell writes smart, formal lyrics that pay conscious tribute to the English verse tradition" and then goes on to describe this collection with words such as "low-key," "specific," and "decent." To explain this last adjective, Orr states that he is not giving Maxwell merely "faint praise." Quite the contrary, Orr says that the way that Maxwell writes poetry makes it appear that Maxwell "grew up talking in sonnets."

Orr comments directly about the poem "The Nerve," relating the theme of the piece to Maxwell's possible sense of feeling a bit out of step with his new surroundings in the United States. "The Nerve," Orr states, is a philosophical poem "in which Maxwell's silvery intelligence gets free rein." Orr concludes that "Maxwell is an intelligent and sensitive writer, and *The Nerve* is one of the most enjoyable books of this year."

Writing for *Publishers Weekly*, Michael Scharf refers, in general, to Maxwell's poetry as being "deft arrangements of ordinary (often suburban) experience into elaborate (often Audenesque) stanzas." More specifically, when discussing Maxwell's collection *The Nerve*, Scharf expects that "readers who seek variety in formal choices will be pleased."

"Maxwell is a substantial writer," states David Mason for Washington's *Weekly Standard*. He is a cross between W. H. Auden and Robert Frost, Mason goes on to say. In addition, Maxwell knows "how to face his generation's largely suburban experience" as a poet, and he articulates this experience, according to Mason, "with mature precision." As Mason says, "our nerves are lines of sensitive impulse, connecting brain and body," and that is why Maxwell's poetry is indeed "a nervy business."

Maxwell is also compared to W. H. Auden in a review by Daniel L. Guillory for the *Library Journal*. Guillory writes that this is because Maxwell, like Auden, "is a wry social commentator, fascinated by American phenomena." Later in the review, Guillory adds that Maxwell "is able to bring an effortless moral and aesthetic compression to his work" and states that Maxwell is a poet to be watched.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Hart is a published author and freelance writer. In the following essay, Hart looks for the story in Maxwell's poem and analyzes why Maxwell left out certain details.

Hidden within a poem often lies a fuller story. Maxwell's poem □The Nerve□ is a good example of this. This poem, as with many other verses, can be read in many different ways. In large part, that is what makes poetry so fascinating. Some people may read poetry for the sheer beauty of its construction, with the poet's meticulous attention to rhyme and meter kept foremost in mind. Others might read poetry for the beautiful and succinct images that such writing can produce. But some readers pay special attention to the story of a poem, searching behind the short, clipped lines in each crisp stanza, trying to conceive a fuller picture of the material the poet left out. Such readers could be of any age, but in *Mortification: Writers' Stories of Their Public Shame* (2004), written by Robin Robertson and quoted in Dinitia Smith's review of that book in the *New York Times*, Maxwell offered the views of a specific thirteen-year-old girl, who, after hearing Maxwell read one of his poems, wanted a more detailed story. This young girl asked Maxwell what the poem was really about. The poet stammered a little as he explained his poem, retelling it in a fuller, more comprehensible story format. After hearing the poem's more detailed version in prose, the girl's response was □Why didn't you just write that then?□

Those who are used to reading fiction may ask the same question. Oh, they may enjoy the beauty of the careful attention a poet pays to words and the position of those words on paper. They also might like the ease with which they read the poem: the way the syllables roll so easily off the tongue and how the sounds of the words feel as if they were born to be together. But sometimes it is just plain hard trying to figure out what the poet is actually trying to say. Of course, that is one of the pleasures of poetry□like putting a puzzle together. A good piece of fiction should also have a few holes, so the reader does not sit back passively, like viewers watching a not-so-enticing television show. Still, poetry can have so many holes, sometimes quite big. As the young girl suggested, Why not tell it all?

What is the story behind □The Nerve?□ First, the poem is attempting to communicate a philosophy. The poet has learned a significant lesson about life, which has helped him understand his experiences in a new light. This has more than likely taught him something valuable, because he obviously wants to share it. He wants to pass on his discoveries, believing that they might help someone else. The poet tells his story not by using the pronouns *I* and *me*, however; instead, he pulls the reader into his story by using *you*. In this way, he is telling his readers, through an unstated undercurrent, that this is what has happened to him, and now he wants the reader to try it. Then he embarks on the journey.

He sets the reader in a comfortable position, bringing to mind an environment that is at once familiar and nonthreatening. □Somewhere,□ he begins, meaning that it could be anywhere. It could be in a heat-damp southern swamp or in a glacier-cold northwestern

mountaintop. He is not specific, because this is not his story (he is subtly proclaiming); it is the reader's. He is also not specific about the details of the life he is describing. He merely portrays it as a "rough shape." This allows his readers the opportunity of trying this poem on without worrying that it will not fit. Everyone can identify with "somewhere" as well as with a roughly shaped life.

So far then, there is a person, walking along through his or her town in some unspecified location. The person is not thinking about much, just walking, when all of a sudden, the speaker announces: "you cross a line, / perhaps." This image is similar to one that may have occurred in anyone's childhood. Remember the bully who dared you to cross a line that had been drawn in the dirt? Whether you did or did not do it, you knew that the minute you did cross that line, something different would happen. That is the tension the poet creates in using this phrase. You are just walking along, minding your own ordinary business, when you cross into another world. You could be anywhere, the speaker reminds you—"in a dusty shop" or "a bar." Again, these are common places; there is nothing unusual about them. They could exist in any big city, like New York, or in any small town, like Sisters, Oregon. Every town has old shops and bars. What is unusual is the experience of crossing that line. This situation could be compared to a story from the old television series *The Twilight Zone*. You—an ordinary person, in an ordinary town, in an ordinary place of business—abruptly find yourself "very far from what you know." You can almost hear the violins and cellos playing in the background as the drama of the story increases to a frenzied pitch.

As in any good story, the poet does not want to strain his readers too much, so he releases the tension. He brings the reader back to a familiar scene—childhood. This strange place the speaker has introduced, so distant from what the reader knows, is no different from what he or she felt as a child, or so the speaker tries to convince the reader. Remember staring across the fence of your backyard into the "next field?" Remember how you wondered what lay out there beyond those safe boundaries? Remember how your imagination swirled with the possibilities? That is where the speaker is trying to take the reader. Yes, it was perhaps a little scary, but the thought of it was also very exciting. It could have been "the world's end, / a breeze of being gone." What would that feel like—to be gone?

That part of the poem is probably the easiest from which to make a story. After the first three stanzas, the poem becomes more abstract, less specific. It is here that the speaker begins his discussion of the nerve, and it is here that the holes begin to develop. What is this nerve? What does the speaker mean when he states that "it begins to give, / a single nerve, / low down"? There seems to be some kind of awakening taking place. To recapitulate, the reader is standing there, and something changes. You have crossed some kind of line, and you begin to feel things (a nerve implies feeling things) that you never felt before. It is low down and sagging, maybe because it has been unused for so many years. It once was higher, when you were a child. But now it has "felt the gravity." Instead of thinking of sagging as falling toward the ground, the reader might want to think of it as sagging in consciousness. You are in the dusty shop, and you suddenly remember the feeling. It is buried beneath a lot of memories and experiences, so it feels slightly familiar, but at the time it seems new and

strange. And □you are chilled / to have been told / that way□.□ It rose into your conscious mind too suddenly. It is at this point in the poem that the speaker offers a warning and an admonishment of sorts. □You ought to recognize it,□ the speaker says. You should never have lost track of it. It was there when you were a child, and you let it go. Then he adds that if you do not watch out, you might lose it entirely. It might, □one day, / fail utterly.□

Readers still do not know what □it□ is. The poet invited everyone into his poem by being vague about the town, the □rough shape,□ and the □dusty shop,□ and now he is not telling his readers what the nerve is. Like the thirteen-year-old girl in Maxwell's audience, everyone would probably like to know in more depth what he is talking about. After all, whatever the speaker refers to, it sounds as if it is something that has changed his life, and there are moments in everyone's life when they crave something different. If the speaker is, in fact, warning his readers that if they do not recognize this □it,□ something could □go wrong,□ why does he not just spit it out? Perhaps, by leaving this hole, this lack of definition, the poet makes the reader work. Maybe the poet cannot take the reader directly to this feeling, whatever it is, because the reader has to find it for himself or herself. The speaker has stated, after all, that it is something that the □you□ in this poem knew as a child, and □you□ are the only one who knows what that is.

Throughout the second half of this poem, the speaker continues to provide his reader with hints or clues about this nerve. He offers more warnings, too, telling the reader that friends may not understand what he or she is going through when this nerve has awakened. He also counsels the reader that once a person acknowledges this new world, he or she will encounter a whole new set of rules that, unlike the ordinary world, does not provide a sense of safety. The person may find the environment to be □inhospitable□ and □unfair.□ Here, the poem is reminiscent of the telling of a typical myth□a story in which a hero or heroine is called upon to complete a dangerous task. The journey might prove to be exciting and rewarding, but it will not be without its risks. Despite the warnings, the speaker encourages the reader by insinuating that no matter what the risks, the reader will be compelled to go forward; as he puts it in the poem, the reader will □start for.□

As the speaker briefly describes some of the events that readers might encounter on this journey, readers can continue to compare this poem with a mythic tale. One may be □plucked,□ the speaker warns, and may suffer. Then he adds, if one acts out of love, one may be saved. If, however, one acts out of fear, one may perish. Here, one can imagine J. R. R. Tolkien's story *The Lord of the Rings* or any such story told in a mythlike manner, a tale in which the hero sets forth on a quest to save his village and finds that the journey is filled with danger. The challenges are all but insurmountable, but if the hero's heart is pure, he will survive. According to Joseph Campbell, one of the greatest scholars of mythology, myths have been told throughout the history of humankind to provide clues by which people can better envision their lives. Campbell also was a strong proponent of following one's passion in life in order to live more fully. The clues and hints provided in Maxwell's philosophical poem appear to be telling us the same thing. The poem, despite the fact that it consists of a mere forty-eight short

lines, does tell a complete story. Yes, the poem has many holes, but you can fill them with your imagination.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on The Nerve, in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Maxwell has often stated that he is influenced by the British poet W. H. Auden. Read several of Auden's poems and find one that is very similar to Maxwell's poem "The Nerve" in style, tone, theme, or all three. Analyze both poems. How are they similar? How do they differ? Write a poem of your own in a similar style. Here are three suggestions for a poem by Auden you might pick: "Let History Be My Judge," "Stop All the Clocks . . ." ("Twelve Songs: IX," sometimes called "Funeral Blues"), and "The Novelist."

Complete a study of the circumstances of the life and times of the poet W. H. Auden compared with those that Maxwell must face today. In what environment did Auden live? Since both poets write of ordinary life, how were their lives similar? What were the social concerns in Auden's time while he lived in the United States? What are they today? Also look at the politics of the two different eras. How might politics have influenced the societies of both men?

Read Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Focus on Thoreau's encouragement to his readers not to worry about keeping pace with those around them. Then write a paper pretending that Thoreau and Maxwell are having a conversation. On which topics do you think they would agree? On which would they disagree? Be as inventive as you want to be, without worrying about whether you are representing either of these authors accurately.

Take a survey in your neighborhood. Ask each adult to tell you about one incident in his or her life that they would define as unusual. Or ask them what was the most exciting experience of their life so far. Then visit a third-grade class and ask for the teacher's permission to question the students. Get the children to tell you what they think would be the most exciting thing to do as an adult. Compare the two surveys and write up your study.

What Do I Read Next?

Maxwell's writing is often compared quite favorably to W. H. Auden's work. To make this comparison, read Auden's *Collected Poems* (1991). This is an extensive collection of Auden's poems, which capture, at times, his emotional responses as he reflects on such topics as the political, philosophical, and religious sentiments of his time.

Other: British and Irish Poetry since 1970 (1999), edited by Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain, is a good place to start for an introduction to other contemporary British poets. Included in this collection are works from Caribbean-influenced poets as well as more traditional lyric poetry. Observations from several different ethnicities are represented, most with unconventional outlooks.

In an attempt to help bridge the cultural gap between the United States and Great Britain, Dana Gioia has put together a book of British poems and offers his own interpretations. The book is called *Barrier of a Common Language: An American Looks at Contemporary British Poetry* (2003).

Maxwell has been publishing collections of his poetry for more than twenty years. For a taste of some of his best poetry written in story form, read *Time's Fool* (2000). This book relates a tale in verse, focusing on a young man who is cursed to remain seventeen forever while the world around him ages.

Maxwell's *Rest for the Wicked* (1995) reexamines some of his feelings as he matured into an adult. His use of British slang, polished by his great sense of lyricism, makes this collection fun to read.

Don Paterson and Charles Simic have put together a book of poems written by young British authors who have yet to receive much literary acclaim. This does not mean that their poetry is not worth reading; these young poets just have not yet been discovered. The collection is simply called *New British Poetry* (2004) and was published by Graywolf Press. The book offers readers a good chance to get ahead of the crowd.

Further Study

DiYanni, Robert, *Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, McGraw-Hill, 2001.

DiYanni takes examples of literary work from the classics through contemporary works and presents the formal tools of literary analysis. In understanding these basic elements, students can more deeply appreciate the meaning of a particular piece of literature and better understand how creative pieces are put together.

Johnston, Dileri Borunda, *Speak American: A Survival Guide to the Language and Culture of the U.S.A*. , Random House, 2000.

Want to know what it might be like to have come to the United States from another country? Look through the eyes of someone from England or India or Africa and see the challenges they must face in learning not only the basic language but also all the idioms and slang Americans take for granted. This book offers a view from the outside, giving American-born students a different glimpse of their own language and culture.

Koch, Kenneth, and Kate Farrell, *Sleeping on the Wing: An Anthology of Modern Poetry with Essays on Reading and Writing*, Vintage, 1982.

Although this book is more than twenty years old, creative writing teachers still find it applicable. Koch and Farrell have put together a large sampling of poems and essays about the poems, and then they guide students through a series of writing exercises. This book is useful for the student who wants to do more than just read poetry.

Pinsky, Robert, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

The poet laureate Robert Pinsky has a very personal relationship with poetry, and in this book he shares some of the reasons why he enjoys the art so much. His discussions, as he breaks down some of the best poems into their syllables, are not only accessible but enlightening as well.

Ryden, Kent C., and Wayne Franklin, *Landscape with Figures: Nature and Culture in New England*, University of Iowa Press, 2001.

In Maxwell's poem, the poet offers a look at one man's life amid contemporary New England culture. Maxwell stresses the importance of taking a step back and trying to see life through different lenses. Ryden and Franklin do the same, giving their readers a different way to look at New England□through nature. The land and the history of New England are linked, according to these authors, and they provide another way of understanding how the New England culture has been formed.

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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.

BOOKRAGS

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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