New Rule Study Guide

New Rule by Anne Carson

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Introduction

Canadian poet Anne Carson first published "New Rule" in the United States in her 2000 collection, *Men in the Off Hours*. Like many of her other works, this book features juxtapositions of modern people and situations with people and situations from history and ancient literature. While "New Rule" differs from this pattern, which is one of Carson's hallmarks, the poem contains other aspects commonly associated with Carson's work, including an unusual structure and imagery that is challenging to decipher. The poem takes place on an ice-covered, New Year's morning in an unspecified location, when the poet uses the presence of a squirrel, with whom she has an imaginary conversation, to reflect upon a failed relationship from her past. The coldness of the setting reflects the coldness of the poet's lost love. New Year's, however, suggests a new beginning. Although much of Carson's work appears to have autobiographical elements in it, and critics have noted Carson's own failed relationships, there is no guarantee that Carson is speaking about herself. As a result, it is difficult to determine Carson's true inspiration for the poem, except to say that her poem explores the pain of breakups. Carson should not be confused with Anne Regina Carson, an American writer. Both were born in 1950, and the former has even lived and worked in the United States, so it is easy to make this mistake. A current copy of "New Rule" can be found in the paperback version of *Men in the Off Hours*, which was published by Vintage Contemporaries in 2001.

Author Biography

Carson was born in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on June 21, 1950. One of Carson's high school teachers knew Greek and offered to teach it to her. Carson gladly accepted and embarked on what has become a lifelong study of the classics (Greek and Roman literature). After earning her doctoral degree from the University of Toronto in 1980, Carson taught classics at Princeton University (1980-1987). During the same time, she published her first book, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (1986), which expanded upon her doctoral dissertation. The book was also the first of many that was modeled after classical Greek literature. Over the next decade, Carson published three more books: *Short Talks* (1992); *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (1995); and *Glass, Irony, and God* (1995). However, it was the publication of *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (1998)□a book that re-cast the legend of Hercules in modern time□which brought Carson and her unique style to the attention of many reviewers. This book won a QSPELL poetry award in 1998.

Carson lives alone, having been divorced since 1980. Because of this, some critics speculate that relationship poems like "New Rule," which was included in 2000's *Men in the Off Hours*, might have autobiographical significance. In 2001, Carson published *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in Twenty-Nine Tangoes*, which won a T. S. Eliot Prize for poetry (2001). In 2002, Carson published *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, her translation of the works of the ancient Greek writer, Sappho. Carson is currently the John MacNaughton Professor of Classics at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

"New Rule" starts by setting the scene. It is: "A New Year's white morning of hard new ice." The fact that the ice is new means that it has probably just arrived, perhaps through an ice storm. Right away, the reader knows that the action of the poem is taking place in winter and probably in a northern climate. The fact that the poet defines the ice as "hard" probably has some significance, since this is a statement of the obvious. In poetry, every word counts, and to make a good poem the poet must ruthlessly trim any unnecessary words. It could be that the poet just wants to help the reader visualize the setting. However, at this point, the reader cannot tell for sure. As the poem progresses to the next line, the setting gets more specific. Now, with the discussion of "frozen branches," it is clear that the poet is, in fact, witnessing the aftermath of an ice storm, which has coated a tree with ice. High up on this tree, the poet sees "a squirrel jump and skid."

At this point, the squirrel is merely a woodland creature that has had the misfortune to be stuck on a frozen, slippery tree. However, with the third line, the poem becomes more fantastical, as the poet begins an imaginary conversation with the squirrel: "Is this scary? he seemed to say and glanced"□ the line stops here, in mid-sentence, running over into the next stanza. The reader can only assume that the squirrel's imaginary thoughts are in regards to his precarious situation in the tree. Since the poet is giving the squirrel an imaginary voice in the poem, she is personifying it, which may mean that she wishes to give the squirrel greater significance. Personification is a technique whereby poets give inanimate or non-human objects human qualities□ in this case, the squirrel is given the ability to have a conversation.

Stanza 2

The first line of stanza 2 continues the previous line: "down at me, clutching his branch as it bobbed." When a line of verse runs over from one line to the next, either within or between stanzas, it is known as a run-on-line. Poets use this technique for many reasons. By running the text over into the next line, the poem moves faster, since punctuation marks at the end of the line□such as those found at the end of the first two lines of the first stanza□inevitably cause the reader to pause. At this early part of the poem, it does appear that Carson is using the run-on-lines to make the poem read faster. The poem moved slowly in the beginning, before she started talking to the squirrel. Now that the imaginary conversation has started, the poem is picking up speed.

Besides the increase in speed, Carson is also emphasizing the idea of instability. The squirrel is "clutching his branch," which is bobbing in the wind. The slippery branch has become an unsafe place for the squirrel, which could fall if it is not careful. The next line

hints at this possibility, saying that the branch is bobbing "in stiff recoil." Recoiling is a defensive move, so the poet is saying that the branch views the squirrel's presence on the branch as an attack and may buck him off. This depiction of the branch's movement as a human-like reaction is another use of personification. The poet has the squirrel finish his imaginary thought train from the previous stanza, when the squirrel said "Is this scary?" Now, the squirrel says: "or is it just that everything sounds wrong today?" Once again, at this point, the reader does not know if the poet is referring to the sound of the ice-covered branches, or if there is something else that sounds wrong. In any case, the next line mentions "The branches"□this line follows the same pattern as before and runs over into the next stanza.

Stanza 3

The first line of stanza 3 continues the previous line: "clinked." This abrupt, one-word line finishes the poet's description of the branches by using a technique known as onomatopoeia□the use of words whose sound expresses their meanings. In other words, when something "clinks," like the icecovered branches in the poem, it literally makes a clinking sound. Of course, in the human world, glasses also "clink" when they are tapped together in a toast, as when two lovers toast each other with wine or champagne glasses. One could venture a guess at this point that the poem has something to do with romance, but there is not enough evidence yet to make a definite conclusion. In the next line, the poet notes that the squirrel "wiped his small cold lips with one hand." Since the squirrel has just recently survived his fearful sliding ordeal without falling or getting bounced off the branch, he stops to wipe his lips. This is another sign of personification, because one usually discusses a squirrel as having a mouth, not lips, which are normally associated with humans. Even the gesture of wiping one's lips has human connotations. When people have been through a frightful ordeal, they may wipe their lips as a nervous gesture.

However, going back to the idea of love, lips are also used in the human world to depict romance. Humans kiss on the lips and love is often represented visually by a set of lips pressed into a kiss print. At this point in the poem, the reader can point to an increasing number of clues that suggest the poet may be talking about romance, yet there is still not enough evidence to make a definite conclusion. Returning to the idea that the squirrel is afraid, the concept of fear is carried over to the next line. Here, the poet gives her first imaginary response to the squirrel: "Do you fear the same things as." Like the end lines of the last two stanzas, this line runs over to the next stanza.

Stanza 4

The first line of stanza 4 continues the previous line: "I fear? I countered, looking up." The way that Carson chooses to break this sentence between the two stanzas seems to be deliberate. Although the entire sentence taken together forms a question to the squirrel about whether or not the animal is afraid of the same things as the poet, there seems to be a deeper meaning in this first line. Similar to the last stanza, where

"clinked" was set off totally on its own to emphasize the sound of the word, this stanza uses a question mark to set off the first two words as its own question: "I fear?" The poet seems to be asking herself, not the squirrel, if she is still afraid of something. In response to this, the poet notes that the squirrel is on the move again, since the tree branch is moving: "His empire of branches slid against the air." The use of the word "empire" places the squirrel in a position of power, since only those in power have empires. However, this empire, the domain of branches that the squirrel normally has no problem navigating, is unstable due to its slippery covering of ice. Even when the branch moves through the air, Carson says that it seems to slide, further underscoring the notion of instability.

At this point, the poet has given readers many references to cold, slippery, unstable objects, so the reader might suspect that these images are part of some deeper meaning in the poem. Since the poet is asking herself what she fears, it is logical to assume that she might now answer herself. In fact, this is exactly what she does in the next line: "The night of hooks?" Although she could be speaking literally, it is not likely, given the context of the poem so far. If the poet was contending with actual hooks at night, it would be more like a horror story. Instead, the poet is probably using the negative idea of a "night of hooks," to express the painful loneliness she feels at night. This interpretation fits in with the rest of the poem, since all of the cold, hard, slippery imagery could suggest loneliness and isolation, which in turn fits the interpretation that this poem may have something to do with romance. Unlike the previous stanzas, this one does not end on a run-on-line, and for good reason. The poet wants to give this line more impact. As a result, she sets it off totally by itself, further underscoring the idea of isolation.

Stanza 5

She also isolates the next line: "The man blade left open on the stair?" This line may be confusing to readers at first. Is Carson talking about an actual folding knife that was left open on the stairs? If so, why is she afraid of it? She lists it as one of the two things, other than the "night of hooks," that she fears. Once again, since this poem does not belong to the horror genre, it is unlikely that the poet is afraid of being stabbed by a knife. Instead, the poet is probably talking about an electric razor, a type of circular "blade" that many men use for shaving. This interpretation makes sense when one looks at the remaining two lines of the stanza: "Not enough spin on it, said my true love / when he left in our fifth year." An electric razor has spinning blades. Knowing this, one can envision the image that Carson is trying to create. The poet's boyfriend or husband left her after five years. On his way out, he dropped his electric razor, which fell open on the stairs. The poet might have asked him if he needed it or not, prompting him to tell her that he does not, since the razor has lost most of its spinning power. In other words, it is dying, just as their relationship is dying. An unspecified amount of time later, the woman is afraid of this razor and everything it represents. By this time, the razor is most likely dead. However, the memory of it, and by extension the memory of its owner, still has the power to cut her. This is why the poet refers to the razor as a "man blade"□an odd designation for an electric razor.

Stanza 6

At this point, readers can see without a doubt that the poet has been struggling with a bad breakup after a relationship that lasted five years, and this is why she has engaged in the imaginary conversation with the squirrel. All of the imagery of death and isolation fits the mood of the poet. She is attempting to bury her past once and for all and move on with her life. To this end, the poet now comes out of her imaginary conversation. The first two lines of this stanza read: "The squirrel bounced down a branch / and caught a peg of tears." Dealing with one's past is not easy, so, like the squirrel, the poet feels "bounced" around. The fact that the poet describes the squirrel's branch as "a peg of tears" is also very telling. Visually, it is a powerful image, because when water droplets freeze on a branch, they can indeed make tear-shaped structures. However, this image is even more powerful because the poet is living vicariously through the tree; she is using the tree to help her shed her last emotional tears from her broken relationship. The last line states: "The way to hold on is"□and carries over into the final stanza in another run-on-line.

Stanza 7

The three lines of the last stanza finish the sentence from the previous line: "afterwords / so / clear." In other words, now that the poet has successfully gotten over her past, the key to surviving her future, the way to "hold on," is clear to her. The fact that the poet is coming to these conclusions on New Year's morning is very significant, since many people traditionally begin the new calendar year by making a New Year's resolution, or rule, for themselves. For the poet, this "new rule," as the title indicates, is to seek happiness again, perhaps in love. She is casting off the hard crust of her isolation, just as the ice-covered tree will cast off its layer of ice once the sun begins to melt it.

Themes

Relationships

Although it is not totally clear until more than halfway through the poem, the poet is coming to terms with a relationship that has ended badly. Her boyfriend or husband has left her "in our fifth year," but it is clear that she still has feelings for him, since she refers to him as "my true love." One assumes that, since the female poet refers to a "night of hooks," she is painfully alone. She is also re- living the death of her relationship, as the dying electric razor, or "man blade" signifies. The poem becomes a process by which the poet confronts her feelings about her lost love and her loneliness: "Do you fear the same things as / I fear?"; works through these emotions□the "peg of tears" at the end of the poem depicts the poet's final tears shed for her lost love; and moves on with her life: "The way to hold on is / afterwords / so / clear." To the poet at the end of the poem, the answer to her loneliness and despair is now as clear as the ice on the tree.

Seeking Guidance from Nature

This revelation does not come from the poet alone. She first begins thinking about the "hard" quality of her breakup when she notices the "hard new ice" outside. Already, nature is providing the setting within which the poet will confront her past. Nature's role increases with the introduction of the squirrel, which becomes the poet's guide for working through her past. As the squirrel makes its way precariously down the tree, "clutching his branch," the poet sees in the squirrel's actions her own life and troubled past. With the squirrel as guide, the poet begins her own precarious journey down the path of her memory. When the squirrel falls off its branch and catches another one, the poet sees her own ability to jump from one branch□her old relationship□ to a new one. Without the natural setting and the example from the squirrel, the poet might not have made this connection.

Starting Over

Nature alone is not enough to help the poet move on with her life. The timing of her revelation is crucial, too. She addresses the problems of her past on New Year's Day. Anything that represents the beginning of a cycle, such as New Year's Day, has traditionally been associated with starting over. One could just as easily attach the same significance arbitrarily to any other day of the year. The poet could have decided to move on with her life on May 25 or November 7. Yet, there is a reason why New Year's Day seems appropriate to the poet, and to so many others. Human lives are lived in cycles. Each human goes through a life cycle from birth to death. This natural cycle contains smaller cycles, such as the year, which is divided into four seasons in most places. In addition, most humans instinctively organize their lives to fit this natural pattern of cycles. For example, many people mark the passing of time in their life by

their birth years. Birthdates may be celebrated annually, often with great fanfare. The same is true for calendar years. Many humans celebrate New Year's Eve as the close of one year, before beginning another. With New Year's Day especially, this new beginning is often marked by a promise, or resolution, to oneself to make a change. Sometimes this change is physical, such as going on a diet or getting more exercise. In the case of the poet, however, the change is emotional. She has been seeking a "way to hold on." Now, at the beginning of a new cycle, after working through the pain of her lost relationship, she has discovered a new path to lead her to happiness.

Style

Personification

In order to get through her emotional ordeal, the poet attaches special significance to a squirrel, with which she has an imaginary conversation. The ability to talk is a human quality, so when Carson gives this quality to the squirrel, even in an imaginary sense, she is personifying it. This idea is important to understanding the poem. The poet's boyfriend or husband is gone, so she seeks out the guidance of another male figure to take his place and give her closure. However, she is alone, and there are no human men, so the squirrel fills the role of the male. The fact that Carson is doing this becomes abundantly clear when one notes the different ways that she refers to the squirrel throughout the poem. When the squirrel first begins his imaginary conversation with the poet, the poet refers to it as a male: "he seemed to say." This continues throughout most of the poem, as the squirrel is referred to by "he" or "his." Normally, when people refer to a squirrel or other small animal, they do so in a gender-neutral way, saying "it." By the end of the poem, Carson herself is also referring to the animal as "The squirrel," in a gender-neutral way. The change is important. Now that the squirrel has served its personified purpose and helped her realize the pain she needs to address, the poet returns the squirrel to the world of animals, and it becomes an "it" once again.

Imagery

The imagery in this poem is striking and helps to communicate a lot of information in a small amount of space. The economical use of words to create powerful imagery is one of poetry's hallmarks, and this economy is evident from the first stanza. Carson uses three lines to establish many facts: it is New Year's morning after an ice storm; the action takes place in a northern climate; the new ice is "hard," setting up a hint about the poet's mood that will pay off later; a squirrel is having trouble negotiating the higher portion of an icecovered tree; and the poet is starting up an imaginary conversation with this squirrel. Of course, when described this way, the composite image becomes bland and lifeless, because it is too straightforward and lacks Carson's artful phrasing. This long-winded description also does not make the reader work to understand the significance of the image. Besides economy of phrasing, the power of Carson's imagery is derived from the poet's ability to depict an image fully enough to capture the reader's attention, while leaving something to the reader's imagination and power of deductive reasoning. She sets up little clues, like the many references to cold and slippery things, to underscore the idea of dead relationships and unstable emotions, but does not come right out and say that her relationship is dead or that she is working through her chaotic, suppressed emotions.

One image—"The man blade left open on the stair"—is particularly brilliant in the way it makes its readers work. When one first reads the phrase, "man blade," it is tempting to think about a knife. However, this interpretation does not make sense when viewed

against the next line: "Not enough spin on it, said my true love," since knife blades are not usually associated with spinning. However, if one thinks about a type of blade that a man tends to use, the idea of a razor emerges. Since the poet has talked about "spin," the blade must be circular. What type of razor uses a circular blade? An electric razor. There is a reason why Carson makes her readers work hard to decipher this image; the payoff is worth it. Any reader who has gone through a breakup, regardless of whether it was from a minor relationship or a marriage, can relate to the pain of personal items that are left behind. These personal items, like the razor in the poem, can be a constant reminder of the failed relationship. Now, Carson could have written these lines differently, telling her readers outright that she is talking about a discarded electric razor. However, this would take away the power of the lines, which evoke a complex image by using a few words to tap into the shared experience of most readers.

Historical Context

The Y2K Bug

Carson published *Men in the Off Hours* early in 2000. New Year's Day of that year, January 1, 2000, was a monumental event in human history. Actually, it was a monumental non-event. For several years before the clock ticked over to 2000, scientists and computer programmers warned the world of the potential madness and mayhem that could be caused by the Year 2000 bug, commonly known as Y2K. The problem stemmed from the technological confusion that many computers were expected to experience when trying to read the year 2000 in their coding. This problem was initially created in the 1950s, when the first computer data was stored on cardboard punch cards. Because space on these cards was limited, and since dates were used repeatedly in many computer programs, programmers made the decision to limit the year date to two digits, with the first two digits of the year implied (For example, 1957 was recorded as 57.) This practice continued into the 1990s, long after computer storage space, or memory, became cheap and plentiful. The problems started to surface in the early 1990s, when some computers began trying to process year 2000 dates. In some cases, the computers interpreted the date as 1900 and used this faulty information in their calculations. In others, the computers malfunctioned or shut down. With help from the mass media, this problem was hyped up, and some people thought that the world might undergo a technological armageddon. The business world spent billions of dollars attempting to make their computers Y2Kcompliant, some people moved their families to self-sufficient farms, and others simply made the decision to cancel New Year's plans and stay home. In the end, however, New Year's Day 2000 went off without a hitch.

Meteorological Disasters and the Environment

While the Y2K Bug did very little damage in January 2000, the United States experienced one of its worst ice storms in recent history. The storm took place in January in the southeastern region of the United States, closing hundreds of roads from Georgia to North Carolina. In addition, more than half a million homes lost power. This ice storm was one of many weather disasters that had taken place in the world in recent years. In 1998 alone, the United States experienced a record seven disasters that caused more than one billion dollars of damage each. These included an ice storm in the northeastern United States in January, tornadoes and flooding in the southeast in the winter and spring, severe hail storms in Minnesota in May, a drought and heat wave in the south in summer, Hurricane Bonnie in August, Hurricane Georges in September, and massive flooding in Texas from October to November. Weather occurrences like these have received an increased amount of press lately, since some scientists believe that the repeated destruction of Earth's environment may be playing havoc with Earth's weather systems. The biggest fear of many scientists is that the increase in atmospheric gases such as carbon dioxide may cause a global warming, which could melt the polar

ice caps, induce massive coastal flooding, and cause other radical, meteorological changes. However, other scientists question whether or not there is sufficient cause for such concern.

The Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal

Even the prospect of global warming paled in comparison to the media spectacle that surrounded the affair between President William Jefferson Clinton and Monica Lewinsky at the turn of the last century. The affair came to light during the investigation of the so-called Whitewater case—the investigation into Clinton's Arkansas business dealings—which independent counsel, Kenneth Starr, had been working on since 1994. At the same time, Clinton was the defendant in another case, the sexual harassment suit filed against him by Paula Jones, a former Clinton staff member. During the Jones case in January 1998, both Clinton and Lewinsky denied their affair. When Starr produced evidence of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair and granted Lewinsky immunity from perjury, however, she agreed to testify before the grand jury. Clinton also testified, then gave a public announcement on television admitting the affair and asking for forgiveness. Ultimately, Starr pushed for impeachment and the case was sent to the House of Representatives, where Clinton became only the second president—after Andrew Johnson—to be impeached. He was impeached on two counts, perjury and obstruction of justice. However, in 1999, the Senate acquitted Clinton on both counts.

Critical Overview

In the short time since Carson's *Men in the Off Hours* has been published, most critics have praised it. In a review of the book for *Booklist*, Donna Seaman calls Carson, "brilliant and irrepressible." In his review of the book for *The Kenyon Review*, David Baker calls Carson "Canada's most progressive poet in many decades. She is like a performance artist on paper, with that kind of adventurous chutzpah, as hyper as she is brilliant." Ann K. van Buren of *Library Journal* calls the book "a cryptic narrative written in a flourishing language that invites the reader to start decoding." This cryptic quality, which requires Carson's readers to dig into her poems to find their meaning, is one of the poet's many hallmarks. Steven Marks says, in his entry on Carson for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*: "Movement toward meaning that partially reveals and then hides itself is the intellectual, and visceral, pleasure of her poetry." Ultimately, most reviewers, like Barbara Hoffert in *Library Journal*, compare this book to Carson's other works. Hoffert says, the book "exhibits the same intellectual rigor, polished verse, and depth of knowledge of her previous efforts." Likewise, the *Publishers Weekly* reviewer says: "Carson's demanding style has been among the decade's most intriguing: critics with little else in common look forward to her inimitable and argumentative poems."

When most critics speak about Carson's challenging style and cryptic qualities, they are referring to the poet's tendency to mix classical allusions such as Greek epics with modern-day characters and situations. This is the poet's most widely known hallmark. As a whole, *Men in the Off Hours* follows this eclectic, historical pattern as well. Baker says, "Anne Carson has cranked up Canada's largest satellite dish to play hundreds of channels at once from Greek classics to hip comedy, Hollywood noir to self-help." How-ever, while "New Rule" is included among many other poems that make allusions to characters and situations from both modern and ancient history, this particular poem does not share these allusions. This may be one reason why the majority of critics do not mention the poem in their reviews. In fact, one of the few critics who does mention it talks about it mainly within the context of the book as a whole. In her review of the book for *The New Leader*, Phoebe Pettingell says: "Carson's latest compilation should be read as a whole, for images and concepts accumulate meaning throughout the work, like a rolling snowball." Pettingell identifies two subtexts that she says run throughout the work, including "the pain of loss." Within this discussion, Pettingell offers a brief line about "New Rule": "the poet watches a squirrel trying to negotiate an ice-covered branch while, at the same time, she recalls her desertion by a longtime lover."

However, even though most critics do not analyze "New Rule" in detail, some discuss aspects found in much of Carson's poetry, including "New Rule." Marks says, "There is a strong autobiographical element in many of her poems." Specifically, Marks notes the following: "Carson, as evidenced in her poems, has also had her share of failed romantic relationships." However, as Marks says, one should be cautious about reading too much autobiography into most of Carson's poems, because this element "cannot be entirely trusted for accuracy."

While most critics favor Carson's unusual approach to poetry, she is not universally loved, as William Logan's *New Criterion* review indicates. Logan says, "The oddity of Anne Carson's poems conceals every virtue except their originality and exposes every flaw except their contempt." Logan says that "Carson is a great believer in blather," and believes that "she doesn't have many natural poetic gifts, and sometimes seems to have no gifts at all."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses the unique structure of Carson's work and its effects on the reader.

Poetry is a versatile art. Depending upon the type of poetry, poets can use a very rigid structure, a very fluid structure, or something in between. Both extremes have their advantages and disadvantages. Many traditional poets consider formal structures of poetry a challenge to the poet, since everybody is playing by the same rules, and so must strive to be creative within those rules. On the other hand, poets can achieve very artful effects with their poetry by employing unusual structures. Much of Carson's poetry in *Men in the Off Hours* falls into the latter category, including "New Rule." These unusual structures have earned Carson more than one nod from critics such as a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, who notes Carson's "harsh, carved lines." However, Carson uses this structure for a very specific reason in "New Rule," which is to underscore the struggle that the woman in the poem is having over her failed relationship.

When readers examine the poem's basic structure, they can see that it contains seven stanzas, each of which consists of three lines. This part of the structure is uniform, but the rest of the poem appears to fluctuate wildly. Each stanza is composed of both long and short sentences, which appear at first glance to be thrown together haphazardly. In addition, some sentences are played out over one or more run-onlines while other sentences are self-contained on individual lines. Could William Logan of the *New Criterion* be right? Are the ideas in the poem "more interesting than the poems," as Logan believes? Or is this seemingly chaotic structure part of what David Baker of the *Kenyon Review* calls Carson's "adventurous chutzpah?" Upon closer examination of "New Rule," it appears to be the latter; there is a definite method to Carson's seeming madness.

This method can be revealed by examining the width of the stanzas, which changes throughout the poem. While this is yet another example of fluctuations in the poem, these fluctuations follow a set pattern□the average length of the lines steadily gets shorter. The first stanza looks like this:

A New Year's white morning of hard new ice.
High on the frozen branches I saw a squirrel jump
and skid.

Is this scary? he seemed to say and glanced

From this point on, the width of the stanzas steadily decreases, until the poem reaches the final stanza, which looks like this:

afterwords
so
clear

This is a dramatic and uniform reduction, but what does it mean? When poets use a pattern such as the diminishing overall stanza width, they generally do so deliberately to achieve one or more effects. In this case, Carson is forcing her readers to speed up. Just as the run-on-lines cause people to read through the poem faster, so do the shorter lengths of the stanzas. This increase in speed mimics the squirrel's movement down the tree. In the beginning, the squirrel is high on the tree, jumping and skidding on the branches. However, as the poem progresses, the branches come alive, bobbing, sliding "against the air," and otherwise reacting to the squirrel's movements, causing the animal to fall□"The squirrel bounced down"□and hang onto a branch lower in the tree.

This descending structure forces the speaker herself to let go and fall. In the beginning, the woman does not state outright what is bothering her. At the top of the poem, the top level of her consciousness, she is on stable ground. She has probably tried not thinking about her past relationship for a while and has buried the breakup deep in her memory. This allows her to live her life in a stable fashion. She is just like the squirrel, who is initially stable at the top of the tree, before the poem begins and the squirrel tries to move. When the poet begins her imaginary conversation with the squirrel, she jumps around the topic of her past, just as the squirrel jumps and skids on the branches. She has the squirrel seem to say "Is this scary?" when she is the one who must face her fears. Slowly, through her imaginary conversation with the squirrel, the woman descends through her own consciousness and faces the pain of her past, while the squirrel descends through the tree and faces the danger of falling. Eventually, the poet reaches the truth of her problem, which she states outright: "my true love / when he left in our fifth year." At this point, she dismisses the squirrel from the conversation and reaches her decision to move on with her life.

One more aspect of the poem's structure draws attention to itself. Besides diminishing in width, most of the stanzas in the poem also follow another pattern, which one can see in the first stanza. Here, the first line is one of the longest in the poem. This is followed by a line that is even longer than the first line, which is then followed by a line that is slightly shorter than the first line. If each line of this stanza is assigned a length of short, long, or medium, then the line pattern would read as follows□ medium / long / short. This same pattern is evident everywhere except in the last two stanzas. Once again, when poets use a repeating pattern like this, it is generally done so deliberately to achieve one or more effects. In this case, Carson is using this medium / long / short pattern to shape the stanzas like tree branches. To visualize this better, one can think of this pattern more simply, as in / out / in. The stanzas jut out in the middle and recede in the beginning and end of the stanza, just as a treebranch tip juts out of a tree. This odd structure makes sense, given the other structural aspects of the poem. The poem has wide stanzas at the tip, like the wide top of some trees. At the bottom, the last stanza is very thin in comparison, like a tree trunk. Throughout the poem, the squirrel descends

the tree, the poet goes deep inside her consciousness, and, through the innovative structure, the reader is brought along for the ride.

In the last stanza, at the end of the poet's journey into her consciousness, at the end of her conversation with the squirrel, at the end of the squirrel's journey to the bottom of the tree, at the trunk of the tree itself, the poet and reader reach the resolution point□where everything becomes "clear." She has used the imaginary conversation with the squirrel as a mental crutch to take her deep inside her consciousness and get her thinking about her past. She has taken the plunge, fallen into her past, and reached the bottom. Now, she has literally reached the root of her problem and can fall no longer. She must put her bad relationship to rest and make a "new rule," a resolution to live life anew.

In fact, it is curious to note that Carson spells the first line in the last stanza, "afterwords," not "afterwards," as the context of the poem would suggest. "Afterwards" means something that takes place at a later time, or subsequently. An "afterword," on the other hand, is an epilogue, a concluding section that finishes off a literary work, a play, or a work of music. If one were to replace the word "afterwords" with "epilogues," the multi-line sentence would read as follows: "The way to hold on is / epilogues / so / clear." In the poem's context, this does not make sense. Instead, it appears that Carson is punning off of "afterwords." She has just gone through an imaginary conversation with a squirrel, which has helped her to clarify and work through the pain from her broken relationship. If one inserts a space in between "after" and "words," then the sentence reads: "The way to hold on is / after words / so clear." In other words, after her imaginary dialogue with the squirrel, the path leading out of her pain is now clear.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "New Rule," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Metzger teaches literature and drama at the University of New Mexico and is an adjunct professor in the university honors program. Metzger is also a professional writer and the author of several reference texts on literature. In this essay, Metzger discusses Carson's poem and her decision to recycle ideas and words from an earlier poem into this work.

"New Rule" is a lament for lost love. This is a topic that Carson has dealt with before in her earlier poetry and, indeed, Carson even repeats lines from her 1995 poem, "The Glass House" in "New Rule." "New Rule" uses a short seven stanzas of verse to capture the narrator's grief at losing her love. The poem explores the inhuman pain at such a loss, the narrator's awareness of what has been lost, and her ultimate understanding that her life has been inexorably changed. These topics are also true of her earlier 1995 poem, but while Carson does choose to draw upon a previously published poem, there is no sense of repetition involved in "New Rule." Carson effectively retranslates language into new meanings, and in doing so, she demonstrates the versatility of language in her poems.

"New Rule" opens with the sense of coldness and the image of winter. There is the "hard new ice" of winter's storm, against which Carson has added a daring squirrel, who jumps and skids along the icy branches. The squirrel moves without hesitation, as the narrator is no longer capable of doing. Instead, the poem's narrator projects her own fears onto the squirrel, as she asks, "Is this scary?" Her own life has become scary, and it is inconceivable that other living things can move without fear. A few lines later, the narrator asks, "Do you fear the same things as / I fear?" For the narrator, the fear is "the night of hooks," the memories that come in the darkness of night to drag her back into some grief. Like metal hooks, with their cold steel that chills, these hooks of memory are sharp. They pierce her mind, stirring a powerful grief in her heart for what has been lost. Early in the poem, it is not clear what memories the narrator fears. However, the images of winter, the cold frozen earth, represent death, the death of an earlier period of growth and life. For the narrator, it is the death of love captured in winter's frozen landscape. The squirrel is alone, isolated as the narrator is isolated, a single being against the frozen New Year's morning. It is not until the fifth stanza that the narrator finally provides evidence of what it is she fears, when the reader learns that the narrator is recovering from the loss of her lover.

In the fifth stanza of "New Rule," Carson finally mentions the man who has left her. He tells the narrator that he is leaving because their relationship lacked something□"Not enough spin on it," he tells her. There was not enough excitement, as he leaves "in our fifth year." In the narrator's grief at her loss, she notes the squirrel's "cold lips." Were her lover's lips equally cold? Or is it the narrator's lips that have become cold in the absence of her lover? The narrator refers to her lost lover as "my true love." So, it seems clear that she has ventured forth on a cold New Year's morning, the representative end of the holiday season and the year, still wrapped in the pain of her loss. The "peg of tears" that

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the narrator hopes the squirrel will catch acknowledges the loss of her lover and her grief.

"The Glass House" captures the narrator's grief over a lost relationship, in fact the same relationship that is the subject of "New Rule." In the earlier poem, the narrator's grief is reflected against other relationships: the relationship between mother and daughter and the relationship of a favorite author (Emily Brontë) and her reader (the narrator), who reads Brontë's novels, as a way to understand grief and find some small bit of solace. In "The Glass House," winter is ending; the ice is giving way to spring, while in "New Rule," the narrator is still in the depth of winter and in the depth of her pain. In the latter poem, Carson refashions her depictions of the winter and changes the meaning of the poem. In the 1995 poem, winter is on the moors, but it is soon to give way to spring, as the "ice has begun to unclench." In "New Rule," Carson situates her poem in the darkest days of winter, with only the squirrel to represent a living thing. Adam Phillips suggests that in Carson's poetry, the narrators "are always discovering something in themselves that doesn't seem quite human." In "New Rule," that something within the narrator is the squirrel, whose actions mirror what the narrator is feeling. The narrator's mother and favorite author, her foils from "The Glass House," have been replaced with a squirrel, but still, there is the same urge to find meaning. The narrator continues to look outside herself for answers that are mirrored in others. The continuity between the 1995 poem and the 2000 poem is established, but Carson never resorts to mere repetition to make the poems work. Carson's conception of originality can be seen in her efforts to rewrite a long poem like "The Glass House" and use it to create a short, fragmented poem like "New Rule." The second poem still creates new meaning without simply repetition.

Winter moving into spring, as it does in "The Glass House," brings with it a hope for the coming season of growth, but the first days of January, as they are depicted in "New Rule" are still some distance from the reprieve of spring. More than just the repetition of icy winter is captured in the "New Rule." In the 2000 poem, the words, "Not enough spin on it, said my true love / When he left in our fifth year" echo Carson's earlier poem, "The Glass House," where, in telling of her painful break-up, the narrator relates that there was "Not enough spin on it, / he said of our five years of love." Again, the mere repetition of these five words offers very different glimpses into the narrator's pain at her loss. In the 1995 poem, the narrator relates that upon hearing these words, "I felt my heart snap into two pieces." In the 2000 poem, the narrator's attention immediately moves back to the squirrel, but only as he catches "a peg of tears." The grief is still present, but the images have changed, have been reinterpreted years later against a different background, and the narrator is no longer solely focused on herself; she can now see beyond, even if only to see that a squirrel can catch her tears.

To understand how Carson uses language to reinvent poems it is necessary to know something about her other work□her teaching. Although Carson would prefer that her readers know nothing about her personal life, what is known is that she teaches classical Greek and Latin literature at McGill University in Montreal. In her interview with Ken Chen, Carson emphasizes, that she "would prefer to talk about other things than Anne Carson." Carson points out that readers have no idea what Homer looked like, and so his appearance cannot distract the reader from the work. If readers do not know

too much about her personal life, they cannot be distracted by information about the author that may be extraneous to her poetry. Though it might be tempting to search in Carson's poems for evidence of her own life, a clear understanding of her poetry best comes from studying the words. However, the information about Carson's teaching does provide a clue to her poetry, especially in understanding her use of language. About her choice to use certain words, Carson draws from her experience with classical literature. For example, an original Greek or Latin text may be translated into English, but the translation is never, and can never be, exactly the same document as in its original language. When a word is translated from an ancient text, the meaning may be changed, since often there is little or no equivalency between certain words or ideas between languages.

Carson's experience of translating from Greek into English and back into Greek again is something that Carson uses in writing poetry. Carson told Chen that

Being a translator makes you think about words as
objects that you carry around and put down in sentences
. . . what the translation does is that it forces
you back into the original space of the words, so when
you're navigating in language, you think of words
that way, as small living objects that have to be accounted
for.

Every word that Carson chooses is placed in the poem for a specific reason. She chooses to repeat lines, as she has done in the two poems discussed earlier, because with each "translation" of the word, the meaning shifts slightly. Chen observes that Carson's poems are "an intermingling, not just between rhetorical forms, like poetry and prose, but of present with past, form with content, and four thousand years of history with her own identity."

This intermingling of time is what Carson does when she takes lines from "The Glass House" and reapplies them years later in "New Rule." The intermingling of form and content is also seen very clearly in "The Glass House" and "New Rule." In these two poems, Carson uses verse format to change meaning. For example, "The Glass House" is a long narrative poem, and in fact, it reads very much like a novel. There is a continuity to the stanzas, and each divided section of the poem can be read as a verse paragraph. This is not the case with "New Rule," which is very fragmented. This more recent poem is not linear, not chronological in any way. Instead, "New Rule" is disjointed and fragmented. Like Sappho's recovered pieces of poetry, it sometimes appears as if Carson has lost words. The ease with which readers can approach "The Glass House" is completely missing when they read "New Rule." The topic is the same; many of the words and phrasing even echo the earlier poem, but Carson reaches back to Sappho for verse format. Sappho also wrote of love and broken hearts, and as Chen suggests, Carson intermingles a four thousand year old past with the present to demonstrate that broken hearts have not changed in their ability to be devastated.

What is the "new rule" of the title? Adam Phillips says of Carson that "she writes with a terrible lucidity about these scenes of disentanglement." The breaking of rules and the breaking of hearts lie at the center of her poem. In Carson's 1995 book, *Plainwater*, she says that "the first rule is the love of chance." Of course, love is based on chance, the chance meeting or the chance word that inspires immediate attraction. Phillips says of rules that they are "a form of love, but a love for an intermediate object. Rules are broken to be made." These are new rules formed from a lost love. Perhaps the narrator should be as fearless as the squirrel, scampering across the icy branches and oblivious to any danger. The narrator can imitate the squirrel's fearlessness, ignore the danger, take risks, forget for a moment the loss of her "true love." Perhaps instead, the "new rule" is to let go. In the poem's last lines, the narrator laments that "The way to hold is / afterwards / so / clear." The squirrel shows no fear and never feels the need to hold tight. Did the narrator hold too tight? Did the man leave because the narrator was too afraid? The poem does not provide all the answers. Carson leaves it to each reader to find the meaning of the words. Just as when she translates Homer's poems or Sappho's few remaining fragments from Greek into English, the meaning of Carson's poem may also be translated into something new as each reader brings her/his own experiences to the poem's words.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, Critical Essay on "New Rule," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Colombo discusses the range of Carson's readership and the peculiar, postmodern facets of her poetry.

"The Canadian writer Anne Carson is among the most interesting of contemporary English-language poets." So wrote Olive Reynolds in the *Times Literary Supplement*. The front cover of Carson's book *Autobiography of Red* offers an encomium from Michael Ondaatje: "Anne Carson is, for me, the most exciting poet writing in English today."

Carson's books of prose and poetry are issued by major publishing houses in New York and London; she and her work are profiled and praised in leading newspapers and literary magazines; and she has held a series of academic fellowships and received a number of major literary awards. Yet Carson has received little appreciation in her native Canada. As Richard Teleky wrote in the second edition of *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1997), "That a writer of Carson's importance should be almost unknown in her own country attests to the eccentricities of contemporary Canadian literary culture."

The lapse is odd and inexplicable (like much of the poet's work). Carson was born in Toronto, holds three degrees from the University of Toronto, and since 1988 has been a professor of classics at McGill University in Montreal. She has no Canadian publisher, and it was not until the appearance of *Autobiography of Red* that the country's reviewers and critics took notice of her unique achievement.

"Anne Carson is the real thing," Rachel Barney wrote in the *National Post*, "but just what thing it is hard to say." Perhaps the best way to discuss the "real thing" is to describe the idiosyncratic books she has published to date. Certainly reviewers and critics delight in doing so.

Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay (1986) is a critical study of Sappho that examines sexual desire, poetry, and the Greek alphabet. *Short Talks* (1992) is a chapbook collection of prose poems (with a discussion of prepositions as among the world's "major things") later included with essays in *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (1995). Prose and poetry are also integrated in *Glass, Irony, and God: Essays and Poetry* (1995). She contributed "The Glass Essay" to the anthology *Wild Workshop* (1997), which also features other long poems by Kay Adshead and Bridget Meeds. *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (1998) is not a novel but rather a free verse narrative about a winged red monster named Geryon as described by the Greek poet Stesichoros (who introduced the antiheroic mode to literature), reimagined and set in the main in the 1950s. *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Delan* (1999), a book of literary criticism, compares and contrasts the ancient Greek poet Simonides and the modern Romanian poet Paul Celan, who lived in Paris and wrote in German. *Men in the Off Hours* (2000) is a relatively straightforward collection of poems. The poems, however, are not straightforward, but clipped and curious. Indeed, they are replete with

contemporary and classical references to Lazarus, Catherine Deneuve, Thucydides, and Virginia Woolf, among others.

Reading Carson's writing, whether prose or poetry (or more likely a combination of the two), brings to mind the experience of reading poetry of John Ashbery. Ashbery's writing has no subject matter per se (it makes no statements ad hoc), but it offers the reader the expression of one poet's remarkably refined sensibility and seemingly unlimited range of reference. Carson too writes out of her sensibility, but the writing has been made pungent, rather that seasoned, with learning. Her temperament, like Ashbery's, is decidedly postmodern in the sense that there is no continuity except what is provisionally imposed by the sensibility. Ashbery's style has been described as "languagebased"; Carson's is based on commentaries and fragments of information form the past and the present. Ashbery delights in shifts in levels of language and popular references, whereas Carson enjoys displays of erudition. If Ashbery sounds smug, Carson sounds cocky.

An instance of her tone is her amusing statement about the Greek poet Stesichoros: "He came after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet." The sentence is meaningless, but it is not senseless; it makes one giggle along with the poet. An instance of her showy use of scholarly practice is writing appendixes A, B, and C to a narrative poem then perversely placing them before rather than after the narrative itself.

Carson shares with Ashbery the technique of the free association of words and phrases to segue the reader from meaning to meaning in the general direction of whatever overall meaning may be present. In the introduction to "Short Talks," included in *Plainwater*, she writes

Early one morning words were missing. Before that,
words were not. Facts were, faces were. In a good
story, Aristotle tells us, everything that happens is
pushed by something else . . . You can never know
enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives
and participles oddly enough, never impede the
movement harshly enough, never leave the mind
quickly enough.

The passage makes incremental sense, but whether the sense of it adds up to more than a sensitivity to suggestive phrases is anyone's guess. Many of her effects are subtle indeed. Here is a couplet from "One Man Town" from the same collection:

It's Magritte weather today said Max.
Ernst knocking his head on a boulder.

What is surprising about those lines is the period that unexpectedly appears following the painter's given name, Max. Who is Max? Oh, Max Ernst the artist. Is his full name Maxwell? The reader is sidetracked, buffaloed.

The poet is quick on the uptake. Here are sentences from the introduction to "The Anthropology of Water" from *Plainwater*:

Water is something you cannot hold. Like men. I
have tried.

Anne Carson is certain to have an influence on how academic poets write, read, and teach poetry in the future throughout the English-speaking world (and even in Canada). It is hard to imagine that there exists a wide public for her writing, yet her erudition, imagination, spirited nature, and cultural sensitivities guarantee her an elite reading public. One wonders what literary delight she will dream up next.

Source: John Robert Colombo, "Carson, Anne," in *Contemporary Poets*, 7th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 2001, pp. 152-53.

Topics for Further Study

Discuss the origin and history of New Year's resolutions, including the countries or regions that still subscribe to this tradition and any statistics regarding how many people actually keep their resolutions.

Choose one of your own New Year's resolutions that you currently have or have had in the past. Write a short poem that depicts this resolution.

Writers often use the coldness of winter to signify a death of some kind, as Carson does in "New Rule." Find another poem from any point in history that uses winter in this way, and compare it to Carson's poem.

Research the worst ice storms in the United States and Canada in the last two hundred years. Plot them on a time line and write a small description for each one of them that gives the date, location, and severity of the storm. Also, write a small report on how an ice storm is created.

What Do I Read Next?

Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangoes* (2001) uses a collection of poems to explore her ambiguous feelings about a troubled and adulterous marriage.

Carson's *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (1995) examines loss and longing as they relate to both life and love. As in "New Rule," the book includes invented dialogue between the poet and others. Like most of her other works, these other characters are generally figures from history or mythology.

The unusual, artistic structure of "New Rule" is one of the poem's strongest features. However, Carson's structures look conventional compared to some of the fantastic poetic structures of e. e. cummings. *E. E. Cummings: Complete Poems 1904-1962* (1994) includes all of the poet's works, which are arranged and displayed according to the poet's original directions.

The Ice Chronicles: The Quest to Understand Global Climate Change (2002), by Paul Andrew Mayewski and Frank White, documents the icecore drilling on the Greenland Ice Sheet in 1998. This experiment has given scientists clues about the history of Earth's climate over the past 110,000 years, including information about the current fluctuations in climate.

In Rick Moody's novel *The Ice Storm* (1994), several troubled relationships in a small neighborhood in the 1970s come to a head during an ice storm. The book was adapted into a film by the same name in 1997.

Further Study

Abley, Mark, *The Ice Storm: An Historic Record in Photographs of January 1998*, McClelland & Stewart, 1999.

In the poem, Carson depicts an ice-covered tree, the product of an ice storm. In this book, Abley collects more than two hundred photographs of the massive ice storm that hit the United States and Canada in 1998. Abley provides textual description for the photos, which he collected from fifty-four photographers and nine newspapers.

Gray, John, *Mars and Venus Starting Over: A Practical Guide for Finding Love Again after a Painful Breakup, Divorce, or the Loss of a Loved One*, HarperCollins, 1998.

Gray, the bestselling author of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, continues his exploration into the different thought and emotional processes of men and women. In this book, however, Gray focuses on how both men and women can move on after they have lost someone through a breakup, divorce, or death.

Kallen, Stuart A., ed., *1990s*, America's Decades, Greenhaven Press, 2000.

Although Carson is Canadian by birth, she has spent a significant portion of her life in the United States. This book examines the major cultural trends of the 1990s in America, including family and education; gender and race conflicts; and technology, medicine, and the environment.

Long, Kim, *Squirrels: A Wildlife Handbook*, Johnson Books, 1995.

This illustrated handbook examines the facts and folklore of squirrels, including their behavioral traits, the environments in which they are found, and their place in ancient mythology.

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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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