Not like a Cypress Study Guide

Not like a Cypress by Yehuda Amichai

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

□Not like a Cypress□ was first published in 1958 in *Two Hopes Away*, a collection of poems by Yehuda Amichai; it also appears in the 1996 collection *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*. The poem at first appears to be a work through which the speaker examines various facets of himself, describing himself first as what he is not and then providing a contrasting image that comes closer to what he is. The self that Amichai describes initially appears to be a personal description, but because he digs deeply into the truths about himself, the speaker touches the universal elements that make up all people.

Close reading of the poem reveals the element of death in it. Whether this poem was written as a reflection on the poet's own mortality or about his experiences with war and killing or the loss of his beloved father is not clear. The word □exit□ is present in both the first and the last stanzas, so it is difficult to dismiss the theme of death or loss. That Amichai has hidden this theme, embedding it creatively so that readers must search for it, adds to the power of the poem.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Israeli

Nationality 2: German

Birthdate: 1924

Deathdate: 2000

Yehuda Amichai, considered one of Israel's greatest poets, was born in Wurzburg, Germany, on May 3, 1924. His family had lived in that part of Germany since the Middle Ages. When the Nazis came into power, Amichai's family left Germany for Palestine and then settled in Israel. Amichai studied Hebrew and, after receiving a religious education, taught Hebrew literature in secondary schools. He later served for many years in the Israeli army, an experience that is often reflected in his writing. As he grew older, Amichai became an advocate of peace and worked with Palestinians toward that goal.

Although he wrote short stories, novels, and plays, Amichai is best known for his poetry, which he began writing in 1949. Amichai was the first poet to write in colloquial Israeli Hebrew. His first collection of poems, *Achshav Ubayamin Na'acherim* (Now and in Other Days), was published in 1955. Amichai's poem □Not like a Cypress□ appeared in his second collection, *Bemerchak Shetey Tikvot* (Two Hopes Away), published in 1958. In 1982, Amichai was awarded the Israel Prize for Poetry. Four years later, he became a foreign honorary member of the American Academy of Arts. After establishing himself as a major poet, Amichai was invited to the United States to teach as a visiting professor. During the 1970s and 1980s, he often taught at such schools as New York University and the University of California, Berkeley.

Known for his focus on love and loss, whether it was a love of other people or of his country, Amichai wrote eleven volumes of poetry in Hebrew. Many of them became bestsellers. Amichai's poems often are read at weddings and funerals, and some have been set to music; they have been translated into thirty-seven languages. His last collection, *Open Closed Open*, was published in the United States in 2000. Married twice and the father of three children, Amichai lived his entire adult life in Israel, where he died in Jerusalem on September 25, 2000.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-5

In the first line, “Not like a cypress,” the use of the negative keeps readers in suspense. They know more is to come. Because the speaker is stating that he is not like something, readers know, or at least imagine, that the speaker must be preparing to tell them what he is like.

In the second line, the speaker qualifies the first line with “not all at once, not all of me.” In other words, he catches his readers by surprise. In this line, the speaker limits the image of the first line. He is somewhat but not completely like a cypress. Again, Amichai arouses the curiosity of his readers. What parts of the cypress are like the speaker? What parts of the speaker are like the cypress?

In the third line, the speaker does not attempt to answer specific questions about the cypress but moves to another image that offers clues to what the speaker is like. He is “like the grass, in thousands of cautious green exits.” This image is offered in contrast to the cypress tree. Readers are led to compare the two images. A tree is stiff; grass is willowy and soft, more reflective of the changes in the atmosphere in which it exists.

The second part of the line is puzzling. The introduction of the word “thousands” offers a sense of comfort, as in protection by sheer mass, as in a field in which there are thousands of blades of grass. The speaker transforms that feeling with the word “cautious,” which implies danger that may be real or merely perceived. In addition, the caution is applied to the phrase “green exits,” which symbolizes a sense of leaving or getting away.

Lines 4 and 5 carry a similar feeling of caution but a more playful one: “to be hiding like many children / while one of them seeks.” With these lines, the speaker introduces the childhood game of hide-and-seek, carrying with it a sense of caution but without a sense of danger. The caution is gentle because it is encapsulated in the desire to win a childhood game.

Lines 6-13

The pattern of the poem is set in the first stanza, in which the speaker establishes what he is not like and then provides the reader with an image that better defines him. This pattern is repeated in the second stanza: “And not like the single man, / like Saul, whom the multitude found / and made king.” The story of Saul appears in the Bible. Saul was the first king of Israel, a mighty warrior, handsome and popular, who ruled from 1020 to 1000 b.c.e. According to some stories, however, Saul was also weak and was eventually defeated. The speaker in the poem insinuates that he does not want to be like Saul.

The poem continues by replacing the image of Saul with that of something more natural, more neutral, and more nourishing.

But like the rain, in many places

from many clouds, to be absorbed, to be drunk

by many mouths, to be breathed in

like the air all year long

and scattered like blossoming in springtime.

Saul, in contrast, was a soldier who fought and killed for more land. There are suggestions that he was also greedy and jealous. The speaker likens himself not to Saul and his weaknesses but to something more giving. There is also the contrast between the phrase □the single man□ in line 6 and the references to the □many□ later in the same stanza. There is mention of □many places,□ □many clouds,□ and □many mouths.□ There are also references to the air and the breathing of it □all year long,□ which provides a sense of the almost eternal. The confines of the image in the beginning of this stanza are contrasted to the boundlessness of rain and air.

Lines 14-17

In the third stanza, the speaker states that he is □Not the sharp ring that wakes up / the doctor on call,□; there is an abruptness, a sense of emergency, and a disruption of sleep in these lines□all uncomfortable notions. Awakening a doctor from sleep can mean that a life is in danger. The speaker, however, is not a □sharp ring□ but is a □tapping, on many small windows / at side entrances, with many heartbeats.□

The sound, in other words, is soft and so far away as to almost be inaudible, like a heartbeat. Yet the mention of a heartbeat adds depth to the sound, for it is the sound of life. It is, in contrast to the call in the night, an image of the soft continuance of health rather than the fearful scream of emergency.

Lines 18-25

In the final stanza, the speaker quiets the images to almost a whisper, beginning with □the quiet exit, like smoke.□ The going away is carried over from the first stanza with the use of the word □exit.□ The almost quiet images continue with the mention of the lack of □shofar-blasts,□ which in Hebrew belief announce a great event. The exit to which the speaker refers is not a great event that needs to be emphasized. It is merely like

. . . a statesman resigning,

children tired from play,

a stone as it almost stops rolling

down the steep hill. . . .

It is quiet, almost a missed event and yet at the same time something very expected and natural.

The □quiet exit□ occurs

. . . in the place

where the plain of great renunciation begins,

from which, like prayers that are answered,

dust rises in many myriads of grains.

The last lines suggest a death and rebirth. Someone has quietly left, having renounced all connections to his material life, and has become ethereal, like prayers. From that leaving point, however, arises a great sign of life as the dust, possibly the dust of the departed, rises once again in the form of □grains,□ which are a symbol of food and thus of life.

Themes

Death

Hidden in □Not like a Cypress□ is the sense of death. This sense is very subtle but is at the same time unavoidable. There has to be a reason for the speaker's using the words □exits□ and □exit.□ The poet's experiences in war and the death of his father influence much of his poetry. The □thousands of cautious green exits□ can be interpreted as gravesites. The rain □to be breathed in like air□ may be an allusion to tears. And the □sharp ring that wakes up the doctor on call□ sounds like an emergency□someone in pain, someone critically ill, someone dying. The □quiet exit□ mentioned in the last stanza must be a reference to the last breath of life of someone who is dying. Clearer is the allusion to the □great renunciation,□ a reference to the final giving up of all things material.

Rebirth

Paralleling the theme of death is the theme of rebirth. This theme is offered in two places. In the second stanza is the mention of springtime. The speaker refers to rain that must be □drunk by many mouths□ and then □scattered like blossoming in springtime.□ The rain, whether it is a literal reference to rain or a figurative reference to tears, is transformed or reborn as flowers. Springtime is representative of the rebirthing of the seasons, when the things that have died in the winter come back to life. In the last stanza, the theme of rebirth is offered in □dust rises in many myriads of grains.□ Dust is a lifeless form of soil; it is also a biblical reference to bodies turning to dust when they die. Grain, on the other hand, is a sign of life. Bread is made from grain, and in the Bible grain represents the basic form of food, the staff of life.

Nature

It is clear that nature is important to Amichai. In □Not like a Cypress,□ he uses similes to create images that deepen the poem, and all the similes are related to nature. The title and the first line refer to the cypress tree, a resilient conifer that grows in the Mediterranean region. In the third line, Amichai uses grass to build an image. Other natural forms include rain, clouds, air, blossoms, springtime, and grains. Nature grounds the poem, the central message of which is abstract and difficult to explain. The fact that all readers can relate to trees, clouds, and rain helps to create a universal understanding, for which Amichai's poetry is known.

Self-Insight

In the first stanza of □Not like a Cypress,□ Amichai uses the word □me,□ which leads the reader to consider the poem an offering of self-insight. To know both what he is and

what he is not, the speaker has to be introspective. He has to know himself so well that he understands himself and can produce the words to expose himself and the images that explain what he has discovered about himself. No reader can definitely make clear what Amichai has truly discovered, but through his exploration of self, the poet exposes elements that are common to all people. In exploring himself, the poet inspires his readers to entertain their own explorations of what they are and what they are not.

Religion

Saul, the first king of Israel and a figure in the Bible, plays a minor role in □Not like a Cypress,□ as do other religious images. The mention of Saul brings to mind the details of his reign and his challenges. The name Saul also stirs a sense of religion classes, which teach the ancient history of the Bible. Using Saul as a reference is not the same as using the name of a politician or an athlete. Saul is chosen purposefully for the religious connotation. □Shofar-blasts□ is also a reference to religion, because the shofar is related to several sacred Jewish ceremonies. Shofar blasts are used to remind people of their connection to their religious beliefs. The final stanza contains a reference to prayer.

Style

Simile

□Not like a Cypress□ is written almost entirely as a simile. Similes are figures of speech in which one subject is likened to another. A sign that a simile is in place is the use of the word □like.□ The poem begins with a negative simile: □Not like a cypress□; what follows is □but like the grass.□ This pattern continues throughout the poem, offering readers verbal images of what the subject is and what the subject is not. The use of similes adds depth to a poem by painting pictures with words. For example, without trying to decipher the meaning of these words, the reader can enjoy the following lines for the impressions they give: □. . . to be breathed in / like the air all year long / and scattered like blossoming in springtime.□

Echo

An echo in poetry refers to the repetition of particular sounds, syllables, words, phrases, or lines. It can be used for various reasons, among them intensifying rhythm and emphasizing meaning. In □Not like a Cypress,□ echoes are used throughout, beginning with the first line. The concept of □not like□ begins the first three stanzas, tying the poem together linguistically and rhythmically. Answering □not like□ is another repetitive concept, □but like,□ which introduces the contrasting images.

The word □exits□ in the first stanza is echoed with □exit□ in the final stanza, creating an emphasis that illuminates some of the meaning of the poem. The word □hiding□ in the first stanza and the word □found□ in the second stanza create a mirror-image echo. The word □children□ appears in the first and last stanzas. Readers should pay attention to echoes. Poets have many choices when writing, and choosing the same word more than once is a way to make a point.

Enjambment

Enjambment is a poetic device in which the sense and grammatical construction of a phrase are carried to the next line of a verse. Enjambment is present in every stanza of □Not like a Cypress□ and is used to change meaning. The first stanza contains the enjambment □to be hiding like many children.□ Stopping at the end of the line gives the impression, especially after the word □cautious□ in the previous line, that the children may be hiding out of fear. The poet is playing with words to alter the reader's perceptions. A surprise appears in the next line, which reveals that the children are playing a game of hide-and-seek. Only reading the two lines together gives the full meaning: □to be hiding like many children / while one of them seeks.□

In the second stanza, enjambment delivers an altered message. Line 7 reads □like Saul, whom the multitude found.□ If one stops reading at the end of the line, the

impression is that Saul is discovered, as if he were hiding (a subtle joke, because in the biblical story, Saul's reaction on hearing he would be made king is to hide). However, there is much more going on than a mere game of hide-and-seek. The eighth line supplies the real message. Saul not only was found but also was made king.

In the last stanza, enjambment is used to suggest a complete change in vision. □A stone as it almost stops rolling□ produces an image of a stone that is almost stationary. Motion is all but nonexistent. The speaker does something clever in the next line by adding to the image of the rolling stone the picture of a steep hill and the idea of momentum. In line 21, the stone is almost stopped, and because of the enjambment, the reader all but eliminates the possibility that the stone is still moving. Line 22 reveals that the stone is rolling down a steep hill and probably is moving faster rather than slowing. The speaker has tilted the picture.

Modulation

Modulation in poetry is the harmonious use of language related to changes of stress and pitch. Although it may be present in any good writing, modulation is emphasized in the writing of poetry, in which the sounds of words are almost as important as their meanings. Reading Amichai's poem aloud, readers can hear and feel the modulation of his carefully chosen words, phrases, and lines.

Most of □Not like a Cypress□ follows the rhythm of natural speech, which in English tends to swing back and forth between a stressed syllable and an unstressed one, almost as if one were taking in breath and then releasing it. The first line of this poem has two stressed syllables followed by an unstressed syllable, a stressed one, and an unstressed syllable: □Not□ and □like□ are equally stressed; the voice drops on □a□ and then rises on the first and falls on the second syllable of □cypress.□ This pattern is not repeated in the second line, but it recurs at the beginning phrase of the third line, □but like the grass.□ The pattern is close enough to give the reader a sense of sandwiching the first and third lines around the second line. This pattern is repeated throughout the poem, layering tone and pitch on top of rhythm and meaning.

Historical Context

Hebrew

Although he had studied classical Hebrew since childhood, when he wrote poetry, Amichai chose to do so in colloquial Hebrew, the language spoken on the streets and in homes. Hebrew is a Semitic language with linguistic roots in the Afro-Asiatic language family. It is similar in many ways to Aramaic and south-central Arabic. Hebrew is an ancient language. Preserved writings of Hebrew date to 3000 b.c.e. , but the language ceased to be spoken around 200 c.e. and was used only in its written, classical form. Hebrew was used to write religious texts as well as legal, scientific, literary, and business documents. In the latter part of the twentieth century, Hebrew was revitalized as a spoken language.

The most influential person in the revival of spoken Hebrew was Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858-1922), who was also instrumental in the Jewish national movement. Before the revival, most Jews were brought up speaking the languages of the various countries in which they lived. As people began moving back to what would become the state of Israel, the use of a modern form of Hebrew reconnected the Jews, giving them a single language with which to communicate. As modern Hebrew evolved, influences from languages such as German, Russian, and English found their way into the ancient language. Thus, the spoken and more common, or colloquial, Hebrew differs from the classical form used in much writing.

Israel

Some literary critics often consider Amichai's poetry a reflection of the history of his adopted home of Israel. Amichai not only wrote about his country but also served in its military. Israel is in the Middle East along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and bordered by Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights caused tension between Israel and her neighbors. For more than 3,000 years, Jews had lived in this area, but then they were forced to flee by the rulers of the Roman Empire. In 638 c.e. , the area around present-day Israel was conquered by Arab nations. Although some Jews remained in the vicinity, their numbers dwindled drastically. In the 1800s, a new wave of Jewish immigrants began to arrive. Zionism, a national movement to reinstate a Jewish presence in Palestine, was established. By the 1920s, almost 40,000 Jews had moved into the area.

After World War I, the British government helped establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. As the power of Nazism spread, the numbers of Jews immigrating to Palestine intensified. By 1940, almost half of the population of Palestine was Jewish. By the end of World War II, more than 600,000 Jews were living in the area. The British government continued its influence on Palestine, trying to avert conflicts between the Arab and Jewish cultures by attempting to put a quota on Jewish immigration and to

give Arabs and Jews equal rule. However, Great Britain became fully engaged in a fight for its own survival during World War II, and laws that reflected the concepts of shared rule and an immigration quota were not fully enforced.

In 1947, attempts to divide Palestine between Arabs and Jews failed, and war ensued. One year later, the state of Israel was established. The Arab nations surrounding Israel rejected the establishment of the new country, and more fighting took place. During the battles, Israel captured more land, and many Arabs fled. Israel signed peace treaties with many neighboring Arab nations, but fighting over the right to the territory continued. Israel ended its occupation of the Gaza Strip in 2005.

Biblical Story of Saul

According to the Bible, Saul was the first king of Israel. He was appointed king by the prophet Samuel after public pressure demanded that the country have its own king. Before this time, sections of the country had been ruled by various judges, including Samuel, but the people wanted a centralized figurehead, someone who would rule the entire country and protect them.

Saul was a man of great size and was very handsome, which helped make him a popular choice. He was a reluctant appointee, however. He hid when he found out that he was to be made king. Nonetheless, when he learned that the country was threatened by invading troops, Saul rose to the occasion, brought together an army, and saved the country. Saul's heroic acts gave him a sense of pride, and from then on, he took his role as king seriously and faced it without fear.

Saul is believed to have been more of a military king than a ruling monarch. He led victorious armies in many battles. Because Saul did not always listen to the advice of Samuel, who apparently received his words of wisdom from God, Samuel denounced him. Saul eventually was killed in battle. Some interpreters believed that on realizing that he was about to lose a battle against the Philistines, Saul committed suicide.

Shofar Blasts

A shofar is an ancient instrument made from the horn of a ram. It is used in ritualistic ceremonies, such as the announcement of a coronation, which can be symbolic, as in the coronation of God as king. A shofar also is used to communicate with God. Prayers are sent with the blast of a shofar. Some people believe shofar blasts are a way to chase away evil or weakness. In modern times, shofar blasts are used to announce important events. There are three types of shofar blasts. One is called a *Tekiah*, which is one long sound. The second is the *Shevarim*, or three wails. The third type of blast is the *Teruah*, or nine sobs. One of the symbolic messages sent by shofar blast is a reminder that one has not been abandoned. Another is a signal for people to wake up, not physically but spiritually.

Critical Overview

□Not like a Cypress□ was written and published early in Amichai's career. No reviews focus specifically on this poem, but Amichai's poetry in general is often studied. In an article written for *Judaism*, Chana Bloch points out the easy readability of Amichai's poems, which □lend themselves to translation because they speak clearly and directly, and because Amichai's striking metaphors carry the burden of his meaning.□ Bloch continues by explaining that this statement is not meant to imply that Amichai's language is simplistic. □His language is far more dense and inventive than this may suggest,□ Bloch writes. For example, there are biblical and liturgical allusions □on every page□ of Amichai's texts.

After interviewing Amichai, N. Tamopolsky, writing for *Forward*, explains that □Amichai has become a human representation of Israel itself, a sort of national testimonial.□ When Amichai writes about Israel, however, it is through his personal experience. □He writes about things so personal and universal that they are public experiences,□ Tamopolsky writes. □He is known as a poet of love and Jerusalem, and seems to embody both.□

Gila Ramras-Rauch, in a review of *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* for *World Literature Today*, states

Yehuda Amichai's simple, beguiling, and challenging poetry continues to fascinate readers and translators alike. He is recognized in Israel and abroad for his seeming simplicity of tone, image, and syntax. The centrality of a speaker in Amichai's poetry inevitably reflects the man himself: a gentle, often self-effacing man whose soft voice is frequently in contrast with the bold statements his poems make.

In a review of *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, which includes □Not like a Cypress,□ Mark Rudman, writing for the *Nation*, states that □Yehuda Amichai is by now one of the half-dozen leading poets in the world. He has found a voice that speaks across cultural boundaries and a vision so sure that he can make the conflicts of the citizen soldier in modern Israel stand for those of humankind.□

In a *Booklist* review of Amichai's *A Life of Poetry: 1948-1994*, Elizabeth Gunderson writes, □In stark, beautiful language, Amichai shares with us a worldview sustained by verbal power, irony, and resonance.□ A *Publishers Weekly* review of the same collection refers to Amichai's poetry as □elegant, spacious and perfectly accessible.□ In a review of this collection for *World Literature Today*, Ramras-Rauch finds Amichai's poetry to be □a curious mix of an active dialogue with the surrounding world mingled with a contemplative mood.□ Ramras-Rauch continues, □His ironic tone, alluding to the basic incongruity inherent in everyday existence, also maintains a certain serenity. He is a poet of prolonged implosion that reverberates around his deceptively simple poems.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Joyce Hart is a published author and former writing instructor. In this essay, she examines Not like a Cypress to find the meaning that lies in the middle of the contrasts presented in the poem.

From the first line or even from the title of the poem, readers know that Amichai's □Not like a Cypress□ is going to be about contrast. If the speaker is □not like a cypress,□ then what is he like? This question automatically comes to mind as the poem begins. This line sets the pattern of contrasting statements throughout the poem. The contrasts are like boundaries around a field. By providing contrasts□elements that he is not like followed by elements that he is like□the speaker offers readers not only room for their imaginations to fill in the space but also a broad and creative image. By exploring the field that lies between the contrasts, readers become more involved in the poem and are rewarded with an understanding of what the poet is trying to communicate.

The speaker states that he is not like a cypress, □not all of me.□ Parts of him, however, may be like a cypress, a tree that, in Israel, thrives in harsh conditions□dry and windy. Another interesting fact about the cypress is that millions of cypress trees were planted in the Martyrs Forest in Israel as a memorial to children who had died in the Holocaust. Because the poem also mentions □thousands of cautious green exits, / to be hiding like many children,□ a connection can be made between the cypress and death. The speaker, however, says that not all of him is like a cypress, at least □not all at once.□ If the cypress, in the speaker's mind, represents death, that is not all he is. He is also life and playfulness, exemplified by his allusion to children playing hide-and-seek. Taking all this information and trying to form a picture, one might read into the first stanza that the speaker is like a cypress in that he stands tall in the face of challenge. He is mindful of the sorrow that surrounds him, but he is also supple, like the grass.

The speaker uses the word □cautious,□ which is connected to the phrase □to be hiding.□ It is not simply that the children are playing a game of hide-and-seek in a field of grass. Something else is going on. By using □to be hiding like many children,□ the speaker is suggesting that he, too, is hiding. What might be inferred is that sometimes the speaker stands up tall. At other times, however, he does not want to face his challenges, at least not immediately. He sometimes wants to hide, □while one of them seeks.□ The speaker wants to wait until someone or something finds him. Sometimes he is a man; at other times, he prefers to be like a child.

The second stanza begins with □And not like the single man,□ giving the impression that the speaker does not want to stand up straight in an open field and be immediately recognized. The speaker implies that if he does not want to be like □the single man,□ he wants to be in a crowd. This notion links to □to be hiding like many children□ in the previous stanza, but even in that stanza the speaker does not want to be the only child. He wants to be included in a group. The speaker also states that he does not want to be like Saul, who is the speaker's example of what it would be like to be □the single man,□ someone who is responsible for the □multitude.□ The speaker does not want to be

□made king.□ Saul was a powerful and charismatic man and a popular choice for king. In standing out as he did, however, Saul exposed his strengths as well as his weaknesses. Saul became greedy and disobedient. In some versions of the story, Saul commits suicide. This end, the speaker claims, is not for him.

What contrast to Saul does the speaker offer? He wants to be □like the rain.□ How does rain differ from the image of Saul? To answer this question, the reader needs to look at the similarities between the first stanza and the second, which contains words that imply large quantities. The speaker not only wants to be like the rain but also wants to be in □many places.□ He wants to be rain □from many clouds,□ and he wants to be □drunk by many mouths.□ These amounts contrast to the quantity in the first line of the stanza, in which the speaker says that he is not like □the single man.□ It is also similar to the comparison in the first stanza, in which the speaker states that he is not like □a cypress□□one tree.

How else does rain contrast to a man? Rain has no emotion, no ego, no strengths or weaknesses. There is no personality to rain, no name, no history, and no responsibility. Yet rain is essential to life. Air also is essential to life, and that is the next element the speaker mentions. He not only wants to be like rain that quenches the thirst of the multitudes but also wants to be □like the air□ that people breathe in □all year long.□ There is an interesting comparison between a king and natural elements such as rain and air. People depend on their king to make rules for a civil society, to protect them in war, and to provide for them when they are in need. People also depend, even more substantially, on rain and air. The greatest contrast, however, is not to look at a king or rain or air through other people's eyes but to look at the basic characteristics of king or rain or air. A king is well known and has many benefits in undertaking his role, but the task can be overwhelming. Rain and air, in contrast, merely exist. Both are natural, circular processes that constantly refresh themselves. If people are thirsty, rain does not care. If people are suffocating, air is not to blame.

Another contrast between king and rain and air is that a king must do battle, and King Saul was a notorious warrior. Wars imply death. Rain and air imply life. The poet makes sure that his readers get this point. He ends the second stanza with the image of rain and air □scattered like blossoming in springtime.□ Spring is a time of rebirth. Blossoming stands in stark contrast to the image of kingly wars, or wars of any kind.

In the third stanza, another contrast pits images of life and death against each other. There is the □sharp ring□ that wakes up a □doctor on call.□ This situation sounds like an emergency. In contrast to this possible death situation, the speaker ends the stanza with the word □heartbeats,□ the image of life.

In the final stanza, the speaker no longer states what he is not like in contrast to what he is like, but the stanza still contains contrast□that between life and death. The stanza begins □And afterward,□ which may refer to the afterward that comes with death. There is □the quiet exit,□ the speaker continues, during which everything all but stops, like □children tired from play□ and □a stone as it almost stops rolling.□

At the moment when everything is stopping, something also is starting, the □plain of great renunciation begins.□ This great renunciation may be the giving up of the world and all its physicality, its memories, and one's connection to people and cherished goods. It may be the renunciation of ego and self-identity. Renunciation also may be another reference to death. Is the speaker talking about a physical or an emotional or psychological death?

The poem ends, □. . . great renunciation begins, / from which, like prayers that are answered, / dust rises in many myriads of grains.□ This image is similar to the earlier image of the rain and the air □scattered like blossoming in springtime.□ Once again, there is the feeling of rebirth□one thing turning into another. In this final image, dust turns into grain. Dust, which is lifeless, is turned into food, which represents life.

The main contrasts offered in □Not like a Cypress□ are that the speaker is not a puffed-up ego, like a king. He is, in contrast, like the unnamed rain. He is not a taker. He is a giver, whether giving means that he is a grassy field in which children play or the basic staples of life□water, air, and food. The speaker does not want to do anything alone but wants to be among the multitudes. Most of all, he is not like death. Rather, he is like life giving birth to itself.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on □Not like a Cypress,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Mimicking the pattern and form of □Not Like a Cypress,□ write a poem using similes that state what the subject is not followed by similes that state what the subject is. Choose any theme or subject, but try to follow Amichai's lead as much as possible.

Research various poetic devices, such as alliteration, assonance, and personification. List at least ten devices and provide definitions for each. Then find examples of these devices in poems you have read. Make up creative examples of each device. Turn the research into a class discussion and exercise.

Amichai was the first Israeli poet to write in colloquial Hebrew, the common language one might hear spoken on the streets. Note how your vocabulary changes when you are talking to your friends as opposed to how you might talk to a teacher, a parent, or an authority figure in your community. What words do you use with your friends that are not in your vocabulary when you talk to someone (other than a peer) you are trying to impress? Ask a few classmates to help you demonstrate to the class the various ways you alter your language. Have one of your classmates play the role of a distinguished adult you are trying to impress. Another person should pretend to be your best friend. A third might be a parent figure.

Choose and read another poem from *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*. Read both poems in front of the class and then lead a discussion on how the two poems are similar and how they differ from each other. Examine the meaning, structure, and themes of the two poems to find their similarities and differences.

Compare and Contrast

1950s: The Law of Return is established in Israel, allowing Jews from other countries to immigrate to Israel and become citizens. More than 100,000 Jews living in Iraq immigrate to Israel.

Today: Fewer than one hundred Jews live in Iraq.

1950s: Great Britain recognizes Israel as a state.

Today: Great Britain helps to broker a ceasefire between Palestine and Israel.

1950s: Between 1950 and 1956, more than 1,300 Israelis are killed by terrorist raids.

Today: Between 2000 and 2005, more than 600 Israelis are killed by terrorist raids.

1950s: Israeli forces defeat Arab forces to establish the state of Israel.

Today: Israeli forces remove Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip to return the land to the Palestinians.

What Do I Read Next?

Amichai's *Open Closed Open* (2000) is the last collection of poems published before the poet's death. The themes that run through many of the poems are love and mortality. Amichai reflects on his life, his children, and his own childhood.

Amichai's first poems are in *The Early Books of Yehuda Amichai* (1988). The poems in this collection were very popular in their time and influenced many Israeli poets because Amichai was the first to use Hebrew as it was spoken in private and on the streets.

Written almost as letters from one culture to another, *Voices from Israel: Israeli Poets Speak to America of Life and Home, Anguish and Sorrow, Joy and Hope* (1998) is a collection focused on exchanging ideas. The poems are by poets who live in Israel but who speak English.

A Tale of Love and Darkness (2004) is a memoir by Amos Oz, an Israeli author of many novels. This book is a glimpse into life in Israel through the eyes of a sensitive man who became an important writer.

Further Study

Abramson, Glenda, ed., *The Experienced Soul: Studies in Amichai*, Westview Press, 1997.

Amichai, who has taught at universities all over the world and whose work is studied at major international schools, is considered the most important Hebrew writer of the twentieth century. In this book, Amichai authorities from major universities in various countries examine the poet's work and discuss his major themes and influences. The result is a comprehensive scholarly overview of Amichai's significant body of work.

Hirsch, Edward, *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry*, Harcourt Brace, 1999.

Whether readers are new to poetry or not, Hirsch's book can enlighten them about the reading of poems. Hirsch knows his material well and teaches others to recognize the beauty in poetry.

Munk, Michael L., *The Wisdom in the Hebrew Alphabet*, Artscroll, 1986.

Hebrew is an ancient language in which each letter of the alphabet contains symbolism. Letter combinations form more than words. There are hidden meanings. This book is a beginner's guide to those meanings.

Sacharov, Eliyahu, *Out of the Limelight: Events, Operations, Missions, and Personalities in Israeli History*, Gefen Publishing House, 2004.

Sacharov's book has been called the untold story of how the state of Israel was formed. Sacharov was instrumental in the foundation of the state, and he tells the story with authority.

Warren, Bargad, and Stanley F. Chyet, eds., *No Sign of Ceasefire: An Anthology of Contemporary Israeli Poetry*, Scirball Cultural Center, 2002.

Readers who want to familiarize themselves with late-twentieth-century and early-twenty-first-century Israeli poets should start with this collection. Poets include Leah Aini, Erez Biton, Admiel Kosman, and Rivka Miriam.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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