Ordinary Words Study Guide

Ordinary Words by Ruth Stone

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Introduction

Ruth Stone's poem "Ordinary Words" is the title poem of her 1999 collection *Ordinary Words*. A mere seventeen lines, the poem is broken into two stanzas of eleven and six free-verse lines respectively. The first stanza consists of the speaker's reminiscence of a time when she hurt another person with her words and a description of the pain and regret she continues to feel for that act, even though the person is now dead. The second stanza is a simile, comparing the music of an ancient reed (i.e., a flute) with the ability of a blind bird to recall its grief.

Stone uses common language in the poem. It is not full of literary allusions or references to high art. She is known for depicting in a direct manner the everyday experiences of joy and sorrow that all human beings experience. Stone's style makes the poem accessible to a wide audience. The lament she expresses in the poem is for her husband, novelist and poet Walter B. Stone, who committed suicide by hanging himself in 1959. Ordinary words refers to both Stone's own poetic vocabulary and to the name she called her husband at the beginning of the poem. The phrase suggests that ordinary words have the power to do great harm to others.

Author Biography

Ruth Stone has often been called "a poet's poet," though this has more to do with her relative obscurity than with any quality of her poetry. It has only been in the last few years that her work has gained the national attention it deserves. Born June 8, 1915, in Roanoke, Virginia, to musician Roger McDowell and poet and painter Ruth Ferguson Perkins, Stone was raised in Virginia and Indiana, where she spent long hours reading in her grandfather's library. Her parents nurtured her love for poetry. Her mother read her nursery rhymes and the poetry of Lord Alfred Tennyson, and her father read to her from the Bible. Stone received her formal education from the University of Illinois and Harvard University, from which she graduated with a bachelor of arts degree.

Although Stone began writing poems when she was six years old, she did not publish her first collection until she was in her mid-forties. *In An Iridescent Time* (1959) came out the same year her husband, novelist and poet Walter Stone, committed suicide. His death drastically changed her life. Having to raise their three daughters alone, Stone took teaching jobs wherever she could find them, moving her family around the country. She continued writing through her hardship and despair, producing a number of critically acclaimed, if under- read, volumes. These included *Topography and Other Poems* (1971); *Unknown Messages* (1973); *Cheap: New Poems and Ballads* (1975); *American Milk* (1986); *Second-Hand Coat: Poems New and Selected* (1987); and *Simplicity* (1995).

In 2000, Stone received the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Ordinary Words* (1999), the title poem of which□like so many of Stone's poems□details the love Stone still has for her late husband and the anguish his death caused her. Her next collection, *In the Next Galaxy* (2002), received the National Book Award for poetry, one of the nation's top literary prizes. In addition to her book awards, Stone has received a number of other awards and fellowships, including the Bess Hoskin Prize from *Poetry* magazine (1954); a Radcliffe Institute fellowship from Harvard University (1963- 1965); a Robert Frost fellowship to the Breadloaf Writers' Conference (1963); the Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America (1964); a Kenyon Review fellowship (1965); a grant from the Academy of Arts and Letters (1970); Guggenheim fellowships (1971-1972 and 1975-1976); a PEN Award (1974); the Delmore Schwartz Award (1983-1984); a Whiting Award (1986); and the Paterson Prize (1988).

Stone has taught at numerous universities, spending a few years in one place before moving on to another. She did not settle down until 1989, when she was seventy-three, at which time the English department at the State University of New York, Binghamton, awarded her tenure.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

Ruth Stone's "Ordinary Words" begins with the speaker describing an incident in which she calls someone a name. The speaker is commonly thought to be a version of Stone herself and the person she calls a name is commonly thought to be her deceased husband, Walter Stone. She uses the term "whatever" here to suggest that the name she used is not significant, but the fact that she committed the act is. The speaker says that her namecalling is no longer important because her husband is dead. She states this figuratively by saying, "your clothes have become / a bundle of rags." The statement "I paid with my life for that" means that she continues to regret the act because it stayed with her husband for a long time.

The eighth line signals a separation from the first part of the stanza, with the speaker suggesting that marriage was not all she believed it would be. "Dull dregs" signifies something that is left over. The last two lines, in which Stone uses the adjective "lackluster" as a noun, refer to the couple's sexual life.

Stanza 2

In this stanza, Stone breaks from the narrative of the first stanza and offers two seemingly dissimilar images: music from an ancient reed, and a bird. She links them together with a simile. "Similes use "like" or "as" to draw comparisons between dissimilar things. Here, Stone compares the music from an ancient reed, a flute, to the way "the blind bird remembers its sorrow." The bird is "in the mountains," where the speaker has never been, yet she is imagining the bird, suggesting a link between her and it. This comparison suggests that the speaker is in some way blind as well. Her emotional vision is muddy.

Themes

Memory

Memory is one tool poets use for inspiration. In Greek mythology, Mnemosyne was the muse of memory and the mother of the nine Muses. Memory is also the muse for "Ordinary Words." Stone begins her poem by recalling a specific incident from the past. She paints the memory of the event in broad brushstrokes. For example, she uses the word "whatever" to refer to the name she called her husband, and she employs general terms such as "clothes" and "middle-class beauty" rather than providing specifics about those terms. By describing her memory of the act in this vague way, Stone emphasizes that it is not so much the act itself she is remembering, but the emotional fallout from the act. She traces that fallout back in the last lines of the first stanza, depicting her marriage as a testing ground for herself, one in which she learned much about who she is.

Loss

Some of the most enduring and powerful poetry addresses loss□loss of love, loss of life, loss of self. "Ordinary Words" explores the emotional complexion of loss by detailing the speaker's remorse for something she said that she feels she should not have said. Sometimes people say things or behave a particular way because doing so allows them to be someone other than who they are. The speaker expresses this sentiment when she says, "Then I wanted to see what it felt like." Unfortunately, she cannot shake the feeling even after the person to whom she said the words has passed on. Not only does she have to live with having lost the other person, but she also has to live with losing the person she was before she "tried on" the words she used.

The poem also addresses another kind of loss: the loss of enthusiasm and freshness that often accompanies a new marriage. Stone expresses this loss in the phrases, "the dull dregs of ordinary marriage," and "The thick lackluster spread between our legs." The final stanza evokes the continuing feeling of loss by using a simile that has as its central image a "blind bird." Even though the bird has lost its sight, it has retained the feelings of sorrow, just as the poem's speaker has.

Language

Words matter, and can mean the difference between life and death. Stone's poem illustrates how words, once spoken, cannot be retracted, and how the consequences of what one says can last a lifetime. She highlights the sheer power of the spoken word's staying power when she writes that what she said "went behind your skull." This image vividly depicts the power of words to lodge themselves in the body, and to emotionally devastate not only the recipient of the words, but the speaker as well, who "paid with . . . [her] life for that."

Class

During the 1940s and 1950s, many Americans had great expectations for marriage and for the comforts that middle-class life would bring. By linking social class and beauty with marriage, Stone's poem perpetuates stereotypes of women who use their physical appearance to "land a husband." Stone's "middle-class beauty," however, only gets her "the dull dregs of ordinary marriage," which suggests disappointment and the desire for the marriage to have been otherwise.

Style

Apostrophe

An apostrophe is a figure of speech in which the speaker addresses someone as if the person were physically present, but is not. Throughout the poem, the speaker addresses an unnamed person in a conversational tone, calling him "you." Readers familiar with Stone's poetry know that the unnamed person is believed to be her husband; those not familiar with her poetry would not know this, but could arrive at that conclusion through deduction. The details used to describe the relationship between the speaker and the person addressed suggest an intimacy, as does the penultimate line of the first stanza, which figuratively describes the sexual relationship between the speaker and her husband. By using this form of address, Stone treats her readers as voyeurs of sort, who have privy to the writer's intense and personal emotional life. Apostrophes are often used to address abstract ideas as well; for example, when Thomas Hardy addresses love in his poem "I Said to Love."

Metaphor and Simile

At its most basic level, metaphor is a way of describing one thing in terms of something else. Stone employs a variety of metaphors in her poem. When she writes, "because your clothes have become / a bundle of rags," she does not mean that her husband is sloppy, but that he is dead. His clothes are rags because they have deteriorated over time. When she writes that her insult "went behind your skull," she means that her words hurt her husband deeply. She uses "skull" figuratively to emphasize the degree to which her name-calling penetrated his emotions and thinking. Whereas metaphors make implicit comparisons, similes make explicit ones. In the last stanza, Stone explicitly compares the sound of an ancient flute to the way a creature remembers sorrow, thus emphasizing the universal and transhistorical phenomenon of loss.

Historical Context

When Stone's *Ordinary Words* was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award for poetry (a prize voted on by book critics throughout the country), it was significant for several reasons. Then eighty-three years old, Stone was finally receiving long overdue recognition, and the collection was published by Paris Press, a small, young press founded by Jan Freeman to present the work of neglected women writers.

Starting a press and publishing poetry are risky endeavors. Book production in the United States is the highest in the world, and the number of people who buy contemporary poetry is very small.

One way small presses are able to generate interest in poetry titles is by sponsoring community outreach programs. Story Line Press, for example, runs the Rural Readers Project, an educational outreach program that sends nationally recognized authors into rural Oregon schools to teach writing and talk about literature. Paris Press has marketed Stone's books by sponsoring intergenerational readings with Stone and Stone's teenaged granddaughter Bianca at senior centers, middle schools, and high schools, in an effort to demonstrate poetry's vitality and relevance to everyday life.

Americans are concerned with growing old gracefully, and the aging of baby boomers along with an increase in life expectancy has led to a renewed interest in works by older writers. Papier- Mache Press's poetry anthology *When I Am an Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple* (1987), for example, is now in its forty-fifth printing and has sold more than 1.6 million copies. The anthology centers on the themes of aging and women's power.

Nonetheless, stereotypes about elderly people remain, and being old and female in America is not easy. Although older Americans have social security and Medicare, the poverty rate for elderly Americans hovers at around 13 percent and could rocket to 50 percent if the social security system collapses. Medicare does not cover long-term care or outpatient prescription drugs, and many elderly have to buy costly supplemental health insurance. Elderly women are worse off than their male counterparts. Because they have earned on average 30 percent less than men during their working lives, their social security payments and pensions are less. Women also live longer than men, meaning those who outlive their husbands and were dependent on them for income often suffer unless the husband had survivor's benefits.

Critical Overview

Many reviewers praised *Ordinary Words* while commenting on Stone's age and quirky voice. A *Publishers Weekly* critic, for example, notes, "Stone often writes as an aging observer," but also asserts that Stone's characters exhibit "a contagious hope." The critic further observes the collection's title poem "Ordinary Words" is "studded with socio- political zingers," and that "The ordinary, for Stone, turns out to be more than enough."

Reviewing *Ordinary Words* for *Library Journal*, Barbara Hoffert zeroes in on the inherent irony of the collection's title, noting that Stone's poetry, while exhibiting some wit, also shows "the darker side of life." Hoffert continues, "Ordinary words, these aren't."

New York Times reporter Dinitia Smith, in her article "Poetry That Captures a Tough 87 Years," reminds readers that Stone "is not a sweet old lady." Smith characterizes Stone's poetry as a form of "brutal honesty" and applauds her directness. "She writes uncompromisingly about passion and unbearable loss; about living in poverty and on the margins of experience," Smith says.

Smaller publications also noticed Stone's poetry collection. Reviewing the volume for *Poetry Flash*, Richard Silberg observes Stone's penchant for the unusual and unexpected: "Ruth Stone has one of the oddest, most exhilarating minds in contemporary poetry. You never know where the poem will leap next."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Semansky's essays and reviews appear regularly in journals and newspapers. In this essay, Semansky considers the representation of marriage in Stone's poem.

Stone's poem, published in the 1990s, references her own marriage from the 1950s. American attitudes towards marriage in these two decades differ dramatically. In the 1950s, many Americans believed marriage was an essential component of the American dream. By the 1990s, however, marriage was simply one more option in an increasingly growing menu of life choices for Americans.

Stone not only calls readers' attention to her "ordinary marriage" but she also asserts that it was a way that her "middle-class beauty, test[ed] itself." By linking class with marriage, Stone brings to mind the image of the 1950s as an era of cookiecutter houses, nine to five jobs, and picture-perfect families: Ozzie and Harriet writ large. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, America was in the midst of a postwar economic expansion, and soldiers who had married after returning from the war were now having children. The baby boom was on. Fueled by a lack of housing for returning veterans, developers began building on the outskirts of large cities. War contractor William J. Levitt's developments epitomized what would come to define the suburban experience. Between 1947 and 1951, Levitt converted a potato field in Levittown, Long Island into a development of seventeen-thousand Cape Cod houses that housed seventy-five-thousand people. Using prefabricated materials and package deals that included even the kitchen sink, Levitt was able to produce a four-and-one-half-room house for approximately $8,000.

For many people, living in suburban subdivisions such as Levittown meant living the American dream. The American middle class grew exponentially during this time□and so did expectations for the good life that it represented.

Stone suggests that the life that she expected did not materialize. She describes her marital relations as "The thick lackluster spread between our legs." However, in the very next line she writes, "We used the poor lovers to death," a somewhat ambiguous sentence, suggesting that either she and her husband had exhausted their sexual passion for each other, or that they continued to have a high degree of passion for each other. In either case, "Ordinary Words" evokes a profound sense of loss. It is not merely regret for having said something that hurt her husband's feelings, but sorrow for losing her partner and their life together.

Stone tackles the difficult subject of marriage, and she does it honestly. This is what makes the poem so profound and moving. She does not depict her marriage as paradisiacal, all bliss and no pain. Rather, she describes it as unremittingly ordinary, one in which both quarreling and the waxing and waning of sexual passion are part of the territory. The complex nature of her grief at losing this ordinary life is embodied in the last stanza in the images of the reed, the bird, and the mountains. This stanza works

associatively, emotionally punctuating the description of the speaker's marriage and the hurtful things she said and could not take back.

At its simplest level, an image is a mental picture created in readers' mind by the writer's words. Images, however, can also relate to senses other than vision. Stone uses aural imagery in describing the sound of the ancient reed, a flute of sorts, and visual imagery in describing the mountains and bird. This is a difficult stanza because readers are not told what the connection is between the images and the details of the first stanza. What does it mean, "the blind bird remembers its sorrow?"

On its surface, the elements of the last stanza evoke an Asian scene of peacefulness and tranquility. One can imagine the poet Basho wandering the northern provinces of Honshu, penning a haiku at the end of a long day's journey. Stone's lines also have much in common with Basho's concept of *sabi*. Sabi refers to the speaker's awareness of the transitory nature of all things. The images of the unseen mountains and the "three notes in the early morning" elicit feelings of melancholy and the sensation of time passing, but the "blind bird remember[ing] its sorrow" suggests someone who has been wounded and cannot forget his or her hurt.

The images above are similar to the "deep images" that poets such as Robert Bly helped to popularize during the 1960s. Such images work through intuition to call up emotion and meaning and evoke a reality beyond that which can be seen. Poet-critic Robert Kelley coined the term "deep image" in 1961 to name the type of image that could fuse the experience of the poet's inner self and her outer world. Its predecessor was the imagery of poets Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, which attempted to cleanly describe the empirical world of things.

Bridging the gap between the inner world of emotion and outer world of things is what Stone does best in her poetry. In an interview with family friend Gowan Campbell for the online journal *12gauge.com*, Stone says this about her composing process:

> We speak□our brains speak for us, in a way. It's all very rapid. But it's not consciously considered, I think. It's just spontaneous. And I think that you have to be able to look at what has been in order to say something about the present moment. Even though poems come spontaneously too. It's some sort of door into your unconscious, I guess.

Whether she consciously came to the idea of naming her collection after "Ordinary Words" or not, the poem does function to represent many of the themes and subjects of the collection as a whole, chief among them the continuing presence of her dead husband in the life of the poet and her family. "Then," for example, the poem that directly precedes "Ordinary Words," describes how Stone and her daughters experienced his presence in things such as summer storms and an ermine who "visited" their house for the winter. "My trouble was I could not keep you dead," she writes.

That Stone was still writing about her husband in the 1990s speaks to the depth of her love and the power of her memory for the man and what her union with him represented. Meanwhile, since Walter Stone's death in 1959 the institution of marriage in America has undergone a sea of change. In the 1990s less than a quarter of American households were composed of a married couple and children, and the number of single mothers grew five times faster than married couples with children during the decade. According to Rose M. Kreider and Jason M. Fields in their report "Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces," Americans are filing for about 1 million divorces per year. Using U.S. Census information, Kreider and Fields note, "About 50 percent of first marriages for men under age 45 may end in divorce, and between 44 and 52 percent of women's first marriages may end in divorce for this age group."

It is not only the skyrocketing rate of divorce that distinguishes the 1990s from the 1950s, but the image of marriage as well. Many Americans no longer consider it a necessary ingredient for a satisfying life and an increasing number of people are choosing to remain single and not have children. These changing attitudes are reflected in popular culture. Whereas television shows of the 1950s such as *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver* portray the nuclear family as the cornerstone of a fulfilling life, television shows of the 1990s such as the immensely successful *Seinfeld* and *Friends* portray single life as an attractive alternative to marriage and children.

The change in attitudes towards marriage, however, does not diminish the emotional force and artistry of "Ordinary Words," which will speak to readers, single or married, for some time to come. **Source:** Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Ordinary Words," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Friedman discusses Stone's style and themes as they appear throughout the body of her work.

Although at age forty-four she was no beginner when she published her first book, *In an Iridescent Time*, in 1959, Ruth Stone was working largely within the elegant, formal conventions of that era, showing her respect for the likes of Ransom and Stevens. Thus, along with many other women poets of the 1950s□Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich□she began her career by expressing a female vision through a male medium.

Nevertheless, within the largely regular forms of these early poems there is heard a complex woman's voice compounded of the artful naivete of fable and tale and the deceptive simplicity of a sophisticated artist. The voice is as responsive to marriage, family, and human solitude as it is to animals, landscapes, and seasons. Given to gorgeous diction, eloquent syntax, and powerful statement, along with occasional colloquialisms, the book contains nothing callow or unformed, although today it appears marked by a somewhat overdone artfulness. This impression is confirmed by Stone's own changes as she has developed and explored the various possibilities of her special voice.

There was a conspicuous silence of twelve years before Stone's next book, *Topography and Other Poems*, appeared, and the single most determinative cause of the hiatus□as well as of its fruit□must have been her poet-scholar husband's unexpected suicide in 1959 when they were in England, leaving Stone and her three daughters to fend for themselves. She returns repeatedly here and in subsequent volumes to this devastating experience, and without either over- or underplaying it she somehow manages to survive and grow strong, as Hemingway's Frederic Henry says, in the broken places. Thus, there is a deepening of her emotional range, accompanied as we would expect by a corresponding roughening of rhythm and diction.

The more general poetic and political rebellions of the 1960s were no doubt operative as well, but Stone never becomes programmatic. A Keatsian poet "of Sensations rather than of Thoughts"□ although like Keats she is certainly not without thought□so busy is she with her responses to the pressures of the lived life that she cannot afford time for philosophizing or moralizing.

Stone's second volume deals with her first attempts to absorb her husband's death, her reactions to the people around her, her return with her daughters to the seasons of Vermont, her subsequent travels, and her continuing growth as a poet, mother, and person. She begins by using more direct speech and unrhymed free verse lines of variable length, not, however, without her characteristic touches of elegance. In "Changing (For Marcia)" she writes to her eldest child, noticing the changes in her, and reflects, "Love cannot be still; / Listen. It's folly and wisdom; / Come and share."

That Stone had regained her voice and creative will at this time was shown four years later by the publication of *Cheap: New Poems and Ballads*. Here we find her risking relationships with others while still trying to deal with her husband's death and the loss of their life together, and she mines an iron vein of mordant wit to make bearable the bitterness. Some of her lines strike a late Plathian note of barely contained hysteria: "I hid sometimes in the closet among my own clothes" ("Loss"). But near a barn young bulls are bellowing ("Communion"), and solace is found in the germinative force of nature. "Cocks and Mares" concludes with a marvelous evocation of female power in wild mares.

Second-Hand Coat: Poems New and Selected, which came out in 1987, contains forty-six new poems. Along with exploring her evolving feelings about her lost husband, Stone probes more deeply into her childhood years and early family memories. Once again she balances between "fertility / futility" ("Pine Cones"), and in addition she reaches a new level of outrageous fantasy and satire. In "Some Things You'll Need to Know. . . ." a "poetry factory" is described in which "the antiwar and human rights poems / are processed in the white room. / Everyone there wears sterile gauze."

The Solution, a chapbook of eighteen poems that came out two years later, in 1989, adds yet another new note□the emergence of Stone's other self, her doppelgänger, as in "The Rotten Sample." "Bird in the Gilbert's Tree" is truly remarkable, beginning with the question "What is the bird saying?" and continuing on to give in verbal form what is strictly nonverbal, a tour de force worthy of Lewis Carroll: "And you, my consort, my basket, / my broody decibels, / my lover in the lesser scales; / this is our tree, our vista, / our bagworms."

Who is the Widow's Muse? makes of the doppelgänger a dramatic and structural device in a sequence of fifty-two relatively short lyrics (perhaps for a year's cycle), plus a prefatory poem as introduction. Here the muse, a realistic□not to say caustic□voice, serves to limit and control the operatic tendency of the widow's voice in her endless quest for ways to come to terms with her husband's death. As a result the tone is a miraculous blend of desolation and laughter, a unique achievement. At the end, when the widow wants to write "one more" poem about her loss, the muse "shakes her head" and, in an almost unbearably compassionate gesture, "took the widow in her arms." The poem concludes, " 'Now say it with me,' the muse said. / 'Once and for all . . . he is forever dead;." Thus is Stone solving, in her own particular way, the problem of expressing a female vision through a female idiom.

Stone's 1995 volume *Simplicity* contains the poems of *The Solutions* as well as a hundred pages of later work. Some still deal with her husband, but the rest derive from an independent inspiration, although it is of a rather somber mood, for at the age of eighty Stone has grown into a deep knowledge of suffering and survival. Her range is broad as well, shifting in a moment from the common to the cosmic, from the ordinary to the surreal. Riding a train or bus, she notes the passage of weather and the seasons, the isolation of those beside her, and the small towns and shops sliding by. She is the poet of hope in the midst of doom, of love as it encounters death, and of the apocalypse forthcoming in the mundane. "The Artist" is revelatory, showing the painter in his own

painting□an old oriental scroll□climbing a mountain to reach a temple. Although he has been walking all day, he will not get there before dark, "and yet there is no way to stop him. He is / still going up and he is still only half way."

Four years later Stone published *Ordinary Words*, a new, beautiful full-length collection. Although she continues with many of her customary themes□her husband's death, a woman's poetry, the transcendent in the midst of the mundane, a mordant view of country life□she also reaches more toward a strange, unsettling, and profound theme of hysteria, chaos, and madness. So we read in "This" of a "glaze of vision fragmented." In "The Dark," about her sister's death from cancer, "we come to know / violent chaos at the pure brutal heart," and in "How They Got Her to Quiet Down" we learn of the madness of Aunt Mabel. The theme is found in other poems, for example, in "So What" ("For me the great truths are laced with hysteria") and in "Aesthetics of the Cattle Farm" ("A small funereal woods / into which a farmer dragged / the diseased cattle and left / them to fall to their knees"). Nevertheless there remains the balancing impulse, as in her description of a hummingbird "entering the wild furnace of the flower's heart" ("Hummingbirds") or in her touching descriptions in "The Ways of Daughters" or in "At the Museum, 1938," which concludes, "Outside, the great elms along the streets in Urbana, / their green arched cathedral canopies; the continuous / singing of birds among their breathing branches." And we see her now hard-earned intensity working equally well in both modes.

Source: Norman Friedman, "Stone, Ruth," in *Contemporary Poets*, 7th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 2001, pp. 1159-60.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Barker discusses Stone's life and writings.

Tillie Olson, in the *Iowa Review* collection *Extended Outlooks* (1982), calls Ruth Stone "one of the major poets" of the latter twentieth century, describing her poetic voice as "clear, pure, fierce." Olson is not alone in her high praise for this poet. Patricia Blake in *Time* (22 December 1980) singles out Stone as one of the most powerful and sensuous of woman poets writing since Sappho. Sandra M. Gilbert (in *Extended Outlooks*) praises the "terrible clarity of her vision," and Julie Fay in the *Women's Review of Books* (July 1989) insists that a place be made for Stone "among the better-known poets of [her] generation." Frances Mayes, reviewing Stone's 1987 book, *Second-Hand Coat*, in the *San Jose Mercury News* (10 July 1988), observes that Stone is not only "wise and abundantly gifted," but that, in addition, her poetry is "stunning work" that spans a "superb range of evocative experience."

Perhaps it is this wide range, one of Stone's best characteristics, that, paradoxically, has caused the work of this poet only recently to be given the attention it deserves. For the work of Stone is as difficult to categorize as the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Lush, lyrical, even at times Tennysonian in its music and meter, Stone's poetry is also, as Donald Hall has said in *Hungry Mind Review* (Spring 1988), "relentless as a Russian's."

Born on 8 June 1915 in Roanoke, Virginia, in her grandparents' house, Ruth Perkins Stone was surrounded by relatives who wrote poetry, painted, practiced law, and taught school. Intrigued by the large collection of books in her grandparents' library, Stone began reading at three. She attended kindergarten and first grade in Roanoke, but then moved to Indianapolis where she lived with her father's parents. Living at that time in her paternal grandparents' home in Indianapolis was Stone's aunt, Harriet, who played writing and drawing games with her niece. Together they wrote poems and drew comical cartoons: Stone refers to Aunt Harriet as "the best playmate I ever had." The poet's mother, Ruth Ferguson Perkins, encouraged her daughter's "play." This was a mother to whom poetry was an essential part of life: while nursing Ruth as a baby, she read the works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson aloud. As her child grew, she openly delighted in Ruth's irrepressible creativity.

Writing, poetry, drawing, and music also surrounded Ruth Stone during her childhood in Indianapolis. Her father, Roger McDowell Perkins, was a musician, a drummer who often practiced at home. As Stone tells it, on the nights he was not gambling, he would bring home an elegant box of the best chocolates and some new classical records. There would be music and candy while he read out loud to them, sometimes from the Bible, sometimes from humorous pieces by Bill Nye. He was "crazy about funny stuff," says Stone. Humor was, in fact, a large part of the pattern of family life in Indianapolis. At dinner parties, the poet remembers, her uncles told one funny, fascinating story after another. Every member of her father's family had an extraordinary sense of the ridiculous, an ability to see through the superficial.

And yet this family of English descent also played its part in polite Indianapolis society. Stone's paternal grandfather was a senator, and in keeping with the familial social position, his wife gave frequent formal tea parties. Stone remembers pouring tea, learning to be a lady, something she says she later "had to learn to forget."

Perhaps part of the fascination of Stone's poetry has to do with the counterpoint between a lyrical, ladylike gentility and a sharp, blunt, often bawdy ability to see into the core of experience. Indeed, the poetry of Stone is as informed by a knowledge of the sciences as it is by a novelist's eye for character, an artist's eye for color, and a musician's ear for sound. At the age of eight Stone read about meteors. Out in the grassy yard at night, she would lie on her back and study the stars. Once she found in the library a photograph of a galaxy that, as she puts it, "changed me terribly." When she read, in the *Phi Beta Kappa* magazine, an article about the new theory of the expanding universe, she became inquisitive about physics. She was also passionate about botany: "I wanted to absorb everything about the real world." When not intensely observing "real" phenomena, she read everything she could find; frequently she took encyclopedias and dictionaries to bed with her. She was, as she puts it, "obsessive about language."

It is no wonder then, with such passionate and diverse interests, that this poet's complex work has defied categorization. Diane Wakoski, in a paper delivered at the 1988 Modern Language Association convention, recognized Stone's poetry as embodying the comedic tradition of Dante, with its enormous range of human experience. As Wakoski put it, Stone is "opening the door to an American comedic verse." Stone's work could also be compared to William Shakespeare's plays, in that, immersed in the world of her poems, readers may find themselves moving inexplicably from laughter to tears and back to laughter again.

In an Iridescent Time (1959), Stone's first collection, includes poems written primarily while her husband, novelist and poet Walter B. Stone, was teaching at Vassar College. By that time the Stones had three children: Marcia, born in 1942; Phoebe, born in 1949; and Abigail, born in 1953. By 1959 Stone's reputation was established: in 1955 she won the Kenyon Review Fellowship in Poetry, received the Bess Hokin prize from *Poetry*, and recorded her poems at the Library of Congress. Individual poems had been published in the best magazines, including *Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, the *New Yorker*, and *Partisan Review*.

Stone's first collection is aptly named: the poems are "iridescent," shimmering with music and echoes of Tennyson and the Romantics. These poems focus on youthful, exuberant family life, as in the title poem, in which the speaker remembers her mother, washing and hanging out to dry the brilliantly colored "fluttering intimacies of life." The laundry in this poem shines in memory and gleams with the energy of the daughters who hone "their knuckles" on the washboard. The title poem is also characteristic of this collection in its formal qualities: "tub" rhymes with "rub-a-dub," and the girls shake the clothes "from the baskets two by two," draping them "Between the lilac bushes and the yew: / Brown gingham, pink, and skirts of Alice blue." The vitality and whimsy characteristic of this collection also spring from the opening poem, "When Wishes Were

Fishes," in which the rhythm and meter gallop: "All that clapping and smacking of gulls, / And that slapping of tide on rock"; "Our senses twanged on the sea's gut string, / . . . and the young ladies in a flock / . . . ran the soprano scale and jumped the waves in a ring." The air is "suncharged" over the "kelpsmelling sea," at "the edge of the world and free."

Yet this shimmering world is not entirely free, not simply youthful and buoyant. The "Sunday wish" of the girls in "When Wishes Were Fishes" is "to bottle a dredged-up jellyfish"; though innocents, they are also becoming aware of the "Seaweed and dead fish" strewed on the sand. The sense of youthful vitality is underscored by a sense that all this lushness and youth cannot last, that something ominous is lurking close at hand.

In Stone's second volume of poetry, *Topography* (1971), such ominousness occupies the center of the collection, for this volume maps the territory of grief at its most acute. Written after the death of her husband, Walter, which occurred while the family was in England, *Topography* was published twelve years after her first book. In this second volume, music is still present, but rhyme is less frequent. Forms are less closed in this collection, as if to emphasize that nothing, not even the striking images of these poems, can contain the grief.

The poems that comprise *Topography* were, for the most part, written from 1963 to 1965, when the poet was a fellow of the Radcliffe Institute. The book opens with a short poem reflecting on marriage, "Dream of Light in the Shade": "Now that I am married I spend / My hours thinking about my husband. / I wind myself about his shelter." As if an echo from *In an Iridescent Time*, this poem, with its light touch and its wry attitude toward a wife's life, causes the rest of the volume to be read even more tragically, since the central fact underlying the book is that there is no longer anything to wind around, no longer any center, or any firm ground.

The second poem of *Topography* is "Arrivals and Departures," in which "the terminal echoes in the ears of a single traveler, / Meaningless as the rumble of the universe." *Topography* maps the journey from that arrival at the place of death, that departure from "normal" life initiated by the death of the mate. The speaker has been dropped off in this meaningless, rumbling "terminal," and must now map out alone both her destination and her itinerary. Imagery is stark: the counter in the terminal is wiped with a "grey rag," and the coffee bar is dirty. Everything has been spoiled, dirtied, and decayed. In "The Excuse," Stone writes: "It is so difficult to look at the deprived, or smell their decay, / But now I am among them. I too, am a leper, a warning." Poems in this collection contain images of "suckeddown refuse" ("Memory of Knowledge and Death at the Mother of Scholars"), "dead still fog" ("Fog: Cambridge"), and "repelling flesh" ("Being Human").

Yet, under the decay, under the almost devastating shock, the poems also trace the way out of this "terminal." One way is through the brutal honesty of many of these poems. "Denouement," for instance, maps the territory of anger following the death of a husband who took his own life: "After many years I knew who it was who had died. / Murderer, I whispered, you tricked me." But it is not only anger that is so powerfully mapped in these poems. In "Stasis" the poet says, "I wait for the touch of a miracle,"

and gradually, through the pages of *Topography*, small miracles do occur. Slow healing is the subject of poems such as "Reaching Out": "We hear the sound of a hammer in the pony shed, / And the clean slap of linens drying in the sun; / Climbing the grass path, / Reaching out before we are there / To know, nothing is changed." Old memories begin to surface, to shine into the present time, as in *In an Iridescent Time*; in "Green Apples" Stone writes: "In August we carried the old horsehair mattress / To the back porch / And slept with our children in a row. . . ."

But for all its moments of stasis, of acceptance, even at times of brief happiness beyond the grief, *Topography* maps no simple country. Section 4, for instance, shows Stone's skill as a naturalist. In poems such as the comic "Pig Game," in which pigs, like poets, "live within / And scan without," and the determined "Habitat," in which the wolverine "is built for endurance," Stone moves beyond the shock and anger of early grief to a wide perspective and rich connections. There is also much humor here, especially in the nursery-rhyme-like poems such as "I Have Three Daughters." The title poem, "Topography," concludes the volume. Wry, wise, funny, and redolent with a sense of the possibilities that exist beyond the lost and mourned husband, the poem ends, "Yes, I remember the turning and holding, / The heavy geography; but map me again, Columbus."

Stone's 1975 book, *Cheap*, is characterized by a movement beyond "the terminal," beyond the paralysis that underlies much of *Topography*. These poems were written while Stone was slowly migrating across the country, from university to university. She taught at the University of Illinois (1971-1973), at Indiana University (1973-1974), and at Center College in Kentucky (1975). The changes since *In an Iridescent Time* are clear from the titles of poems. In Stone's first book, poems are titled "Snow," "Ballet," "Collage," "Swans"; in *Cheap*, poems are titled "Cocks and Mares," "Who's Out," "The Nose," "Bazook," "Bored on a Greyhound," and the much-anthologized "The Song of Absinthe Granny."

In *Cheap* Stone's humor comes into its own. *Topography* was less mannered, less lyrical than *In an Iridescent Time*; *Cheap* is even less so. The poet has moved through the country of grief and has emerged, seeing everything, right down to its frightening, funny core. Connections between human and nonhuman life are made even clearer□in "Vegetables I" eggplants are compared to decapitated human heads, "utterly drained of blood." In the market, they seem "to be smiling / In a shy embarrassed manner, / jostling among themselves." In "Vegetables II" Stone writes:

It is the cutting room, the kitchen,
Where I go like an addict
To eat of death.
The eggplant is silent.
We put our heads together.
You are so smooth and cool and purple,
I say. Which of us will it be?

Such wryness and pithiness characterize this collection, which is tighter, more ironic, and wiser than either of the first two collections.

Styles and themes begun in the earlier volumes do continue. In the title poem, "Cheap," young love is the subject of fond scorn: "He was young and cheap . . . I was easy in my sleep"; the boy and girl are "braying, galloping / Like a pair of mules," running "blind as moles." Marriage and betrayal continue as themes. In "Codicil" Stone writes of a widowed landlady who keeps all the eggs her ornithologist husband collected, comparing all the "secret muted shapes" of "unborn wisened eggs" to the stillborn possibilities for her own marriage. Stone continues to examine her widowhood in poems such as "Loss" ("I hid sometimes in the closet among my own clothes"), "Habit" ("Every day I dig you up . . . I show you my old shy breasts"), and "The Innocent" ("I remember you / in the sound of an oak stake / Hammered into the frozen heart of the ground"). Other poems are lighter: "Tic Tac Toe" makes fun of all good intentions, of people "pulling in their stomachs and promising / To exercise more, drink less, grow brilliant."

Some poems in *Cheap* use the nursery-rhyme style of earlier poems. "Bargain," "The Tree," and "The Song of Absinthe Granny" all incorporate singsong rhythms. Diana O'Hehir (in a paper delivered at the Modern Language Association convention, December 1988) observed that Stone's use of rhythms and comical word patterns, often coupled with terrifying subject matter, accounts for much of the poems' power. As O'Hehir put it, Stone "lures the reader in with the familiar rhythms of childhood, promises a pattern which the reader can join in on and follow along with, then yanks the entire structure out from under the feet," so that the reader is "surprised, startled, and made to follow gasping."

Surprising, startling, *Cheap* was the most direct, the most piercing of Stone's collections, until her *Second-Hand Coat: Poems New and Selected* was published in 1987. Here one finds a poet writing in her fullest power, relying upon craft, music, wisdom, and humor. "Orange Poem Praising Brown" captures the anxieties of the writer with admirable wit: "The quick poem jumped over the lazy woman. / There it goes flapping like an orange with peeling wings." A dialogue continues between the woman and the brown poem: "Watch it, the poem cried. You aren't wearing any pants. . . . / Praise my loose hung dangle, he said. Tell me about myself in oral fragments. . . ." "Some Things You'll Need to Know before You Join the Union" is another comic poem for poets:

At the poetry factory
body poems are writhing and bleeding.
.....
The antiwar and human rights poems
are processed in the white room.
Everyone in there wears sterile gauze.
These poems go for a lot.
No one wants to mess up.
There's expensive equipment involved.
The workers have to be heavy,

very heavy.
These poems are packaged in cement.
You frequently hear them drop with a dull thud.

Part of Stone's humor is based on the characters who populate this volume, characters who may remind readers of Fred and Ida of "Bazook" in *Cheap*. Stone's characters are outrageously funny, and very real, similar to those of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. As Kevin Clark observed (in a paper delivered at the 1988 Modern Language Association convention), they are often grotesques, in which readers may recognize themselves. As in the poem "Bazook," many of the characters in *Second- Hand Coat* have gone "beserk" [*sic*]; but the poems question what is meant by "sanity" and "insanity." Mrs. Dubosky in "What Can You Do?"; Aunt Virginia in "Curtains"; Uncle, Little Ivan, and Aunt Bess in "The Miracle"; the Masons in "Sunday" □all are a little daft, yet, as Clark noted, they show readers the truth of who *they* are.

The humor of *Second-Hand Coat* also extends to the poems that show Stone as an avid student of contemporary science. Just as the young Stone took encyclopedias to bed with her, the mature Stone reads everything she can about astronomy, the new physics, the natural world, the galaxy, neurons, and protons. Much of the effect of these poems has to do with Stone's immense knowledge of the way the world actually works, and in many of these poems, she fuses the wacky humor and drummer's rhythms of her father, the lyricism of her mother's reading of Tennyson, and her own relentless curiosity, wit, and wisdom. "The bunya-bunya is a great louse that sucks," Stone begins in "From the Arboretum," a poem that goes on to show the intricacy of relatedness: "Rings of ants, bark beetles, sponge molds, / even cockroaches communicate in its armpits. / But it protests only with the voices of starlings, / their colony at its top in the forward brush. / To them it is only an old armchair, a brothel, the front porch." Other poems are even more obviously based on Stone's scientific knowledge. "Moving Right Along" begins, "At the molecular level, / in another dimension, oy, are you different! / That's where it all shreds / like Watergate." Like the new physicists who have come to the conclusion that there is no such thing as objectivity, that all depends on point of view, Stone questions the possibilities for clear answers in "At the Center"; "The center is simple, they say. / They say at the Fermi accelerator, / 'Rejoice. A clear and clean/explanation of matter is possible. . . .'" The poem continues with the speaker's questioning: "Where is this place, / the center they speak of? Currants, / red as faraway suns, burn on the currant bush." The eyes of the beloved, now long dead, are "far underground," where they "fall apart, / while their particles still shoot like meteors / through space making their own isolated trajectories."

In *Second-Hand Coat* the grief of the widow is softened, muted. In "Curtains," another tragicomic poem, the speaker asks at the end, "See what you miss by being dead?" In "Winter" she asks, "Am I going toward you or away from you on this train?" "Message from Your Toes" begins, "Even in the absence of light / there is light. Even in the least electron / there are photons. / So in a larger sense you must consider your own toes. . . ." Stone connects electron, photon, and toes in a poem that elicits laughter in the beginning and a deep sense of poignancy at the conclusion: "And your toes,

passengers of the extreme / clustered on your dough-white body, / say how they miss his feet, the thin elegance of his ankles."

Often poignant, as in "Liebeslied," some of these poems are as lyrical as any in *In an Iridescent Time*. In "Names" the internal rhymes offer the reader as rich an inheritance as all the "plants on the mountain," with their names like "pennyroyal, boneset, / bedstraw, toadflax□from whom I did descend in perpetuity." The music in *Second- Hand Coat* is far more intricate than that of previous collections; sound in Stone's poetry deserves more study.

Second-Hand Coat is a book that, like the speaker's mother in the poem "Pokeberries" (as Donald Hall has observed), splits language in two. The next-to-last poem in the section of new poems in *Second-Hand Coat*, "Translations," may well be Stone's best poem to date. In it one sees the most powerful characteristics of the collection: a tone of forgiveness and understanding, and, through anger and aversion, a deep forgiving love.

There is also laughter. "Women Laughing," for instance, incorporates all the lyricism of *In an Iridescent Time*, with a new complexity, a richer, maturer vision:

Laughter from women gathers like reeds in the
river.
A silence of light below their rhythm glazes the
water.
They are on a rim of silence looking into the river.
Their laughter traces the water as kingfishers dipping
circles within circles set the reeds clicking;
and an upward rush of herons lifts out of the nests
of laughter,
their long stick-legs dangling, herons, rising out of
the river.

Ruth Stone's poems are indeed "nests of laughter," of wisdom and humor. With *Second-Hand Coat* Stone's poems have not only moved far beyond personal grief but have also risen to the stature of perhaps the finest poetry being written today.

Source: Wendy Barker, "Ruth Stone," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 105, *American Poets Since World War II, Second Series*, edited by R. S. Gwynn, Gale Research, 1991, pp. 241-46.

Adaptations

Paris Press, which published *Ordinary Words*, issued *Poetry Alive!* (1991), a compact disc of Stone reading poems from *Ordinary Words* and *Simplicity*. The disc can be ordered by contacting Paris Press, P.O. Box 487, Ashfield, MA 01330.

Topics for Further Study

Stone's poem addresses the common human experience of regret. Make a list of three things that you regret having said to someone in the last year. Next, write a letter to that person, apologizing for what you said and trying to make things right.

What is the "whatever" in the poem's first line? Brainstorm a list of words that the speaker might have used to insult the person addressed and then discuss why some words are more harmful than others.

In groups: Make a list of your ideas about the institution of marriage, its benefits and drawbacks. Next, write a short essay speculating about your own future and marriage. Will you marry someone? What type of person will you choose? How old will you be? Will you have children? How many?

Keep a diary for three months, noting all of the times you are happy and sad and why. At the end of the three months, read over your entries and see if you can discern a pattern for your feelings. Write a diary entry interpreting your moods for the time.

Bring to class a piece of music that makes you feel melancholy and play it for your classmates. Discuss the qualities of the music that elicit sadness and the differences in responses from classmates.

What Do I Read Next?

In part, Stone's poem is an exploration of the expectations and disappointments of marriage in the 1950s. In *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (2000), Stephanie Coontz argues against representations of the 1950s American family as wholesome and virtuous, claiming that notions of traditional family values are rooted more in myth than fact.

Stone's first collection, *In an Iridescent Time* (1959), focuses on Stone's childhood family life.

Stone won the National Book Award for poetry in 2002 for *In the Next Galaxy*, published by Copper Canyon Press.

John Updike's novel *Rabbit, Run* (1960) follows the life of Harry Angstrom, a former star basketball player in high school, who is now in his midtwenties, struggling in an unfulfilling marriage. Updike's (male) representation of marriage in the 1950s is a useful counterpoint to Stone's representation of marriage during that era.

Further Study

Barker, Wendy, "Ruth Stone," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 105, *American Poets since World War II, Second Series*, edited by R. S. Gwynn, Gale Research, 1991, pp. 241-46.

Barker offers a thorough overview of Stone's career through 1990 and includes a useful bibliography of secondary sources.

Barker, Wendy, and Sandra M. Gilbert, eds., *The House Is Made of Poetry: The Art of Ruth Stone*, Ad feminam series, Southern Illinois University Press, 1996.

Barker and Gilbert collect essays on Stone's poetry by critics and poets such as Willis Barnstone and Diane Wakoski.

Bishop, Elizabeth, *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1983.

Critics have often compared Stone's poetry to that of Elizabeth Bishop for its attention to detail and the ordinary things of life.

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar, "The War of the Words," in *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 1, Yale University Press, 1989.

Gilbert and Gubar discuss Stone's place in relation to other women writers of the late twentieth century.

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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.

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