Our Side Study Guide

Our Side by Carol Muske-Dukes

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Carol Muske-Dukes's poem □Our Side,□ published in 2003, is about the loss of a lover. Many of the poems in *Sparrow*, the collection in which this poem appears, are about death. The collection is dedicated to the poet's husband, David Dukes, who died unexpectedly in 2000. In □Our Side,□ the speaker tries to call back the spirit of someone she has loved and who has died. She wants him to return in some form to □our side,□ the side of the living. The speaker admits that she understands that this need to see □the lost,□ those who have died, is one-sided. The living, the speaker says, are the ones who have the need to be remembered. This view is the opposite of the belief and practice of most people, who visit the graves of the dead in attempts to remember them, to memorialize them. Although it is about death and about longing on the part of someone who has lost a lover, □Our Side□ is not morbid or melancholic. By the end of the poem, readers are much more aware of the love felt by the speaker than they are of death. The poem is a love song rather than a requiem.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1945

Carol Muske-Dukes is the director and founder of the graduate program in literature and creative writing at the University of Southern California, where she also teaches poetry. She is a reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* and the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, for which she writes a regular column called □Poets Corner.□ Muske-Dukes is the author of several fiction and nonfiction books, but she is best known for her award-winning poetry.

Muske-Dukes was born on December 17, 1945, in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and went to Creighton University, where she received her bachelor's degree in English in 1967. Three years later, she completed her master's degree in English and creative writing at San Francisco State University. Muske-Dukes gained her writing experience at several prestigious schools, including the New School for Social Research, Columbia University, and New York University. She has taught at the University of Virginia, the University of Iowa, and the University of California, Irvine.

Her books of poetry include *Sparrow* (2003), in which □Our Side□ appears; *An Octave above Thunder: New and Selected Poems* (1997); *Red Trousseau* (1993); *Applause* (1989); *Skylight* (1981); and *Camouflage* (1975). *Women and Poetry: Truth, Autobiography and the Shape of the Self* (1997) and *Married to the Icepick Killer: A Poet in Hollywood* (2002) are her two collections of essays. Muske-Dukes has written three novels: *Life after Death: A Novel* (2001), *Saving St. Germ* (1993), and *Dear Digby* (1989).

Muske-Dukes has received many awards, including the Chapin Award from Columbia University for *Sparrow*, which also was a National Book Award finalist. *Married to the Icepick Killer* was listed as a Best Book of 2002 by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The poet has one daughter and was married to the actor David Dukes, who died in 2000. *Sparrow* is dedicated to her late husband.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

□Our Side□ begins with an attempt by the speaker to understand what it must be like to be dead. The speaker begins by describing the □newly dead□ as □disoriented□ because they have crossed over into unfamiliar territory. Their first reaction, according to the speaker, is □to turn back.□ The speaker refers to the newly dead as having crossed □the great expanse of water.□ This crossing may refer to the symbolic crossing of the river that is often mentioned in poems and myths about death. The crossing also may be a reference to a favorite place in which the speaker and her departed lover may have spent time□the ocean's edge, which is mentioned later in the poem.

The speaker relates the great expanse of water to another kind of distance, that which is □inside each of them,□ that is, the newly dead. This distance, which the speaker does not quite define, is □steadily growing□ inside of them. It is also this distance that □draws them away at last.□ Depending on the reader's religious or spiritual background, these lines can be interpreted in many ways. The distance may represent a god or a spiritual dwelling place, such as heaven. Because the distance is inside each of the departed, it also may be a reference to the soul. In this sense, the speaker may be referring to the soul's wanting to be reunited with the source of its energy, which is what is causing the dead to be drawn away. By using the phrase □at last□ at the end of stanza 1, the speaker adds an element of release, as if the living endure life and the dead finally experience a sense of the peace they have been waiting for. This feeling is emphasized in stanza 2.

Stanza 2

□Tenderness and longing lose direction,□ the speaker states. This notion is confusing and difficult to understand until the next phrase is added: □. . . all terror / and love in the cells slowly dissipate.□ The speaker imagines the release that the dead feel when they cross the great expanse of water. All worldly emotions, all connections with loved ones are finally lifted, or finally melted away. These burdens belong to the living, not the dead. The burdens are the feeling of loneliness and the emptiness that those left behind must bear. The ones who once supported them in love no longer care. □Despite our endless calling□ is attached to stanza 2 by meaning as well as by structure. The dead release their emotions despite the fact that the ones whom they once loved are calling out to them. The thought is completed in stanza 3.

Stanza 3

The first line of stanza 3 completes the thought that begins □Despite our endless calling,□ in stanza 2. The speaker continues, □their names fall away into the great canyons / of the infinite.□ Loved ones crying out to the dead, calling their names,

eventually must face the fact that the newly dead cannot hear them. The names of the newly dead are like their bodies. They have become useless. A name is significant only in this life. Babies are born and given a name. The mention of that name conjures up the memories of the person the baby has become in life, all the experiences shared with the people who loved him or her. The name will always be closely followed by the image of that person. The newly dead, however, have no more need of names. They return to the place they inhabited before they were born, when they had no names. Their names □fall away□ in this reality, as does everything else about their physicality on earth. The newly dead fall into the □great canyons of the infinite,□ a symbol of abstractions such as nothingness, eternity, the unknown, and a spiritual god or source.

By □They try to remember how to answer,□ the speaker means that the newly dead are unable to answer the cries of those left behind. She wants to believe that the newly dead do hear the cries, but because they have lost their physicality, the dead have lost all emotion and connection. They have forgotten how to speak, so they □turn away.□ In stanza 1, the speaker uses the phrase □turn back□; in stanza 3, she says □turn away.□ The direction has changed. In stanza 1, the newly dead appear to be contemplating coming back to earth, to life. By stanza 3, however, they turn away from life and the ones who are calling them, because they are □distracted.□ Something else apparently is calling to them□something that is more enticing than life on earth. The newly dead turn away □from the repetitive cries□ of those left behind. The speaker, however, has not given up all hope of making contact. □What shall I call you now, lost sailor?□ she asks. If the newly dead does not respond to his name, the speaker wonders, will he respond to something else? By using the adjective □lost,□ which corresponds to □disoriented,□ in stanza 1, the poet ties the stanzas together. The speaker also expresses hope, in a strange way, through the use of these two words. If the newly dead is disoriented and lost, there is still a chance that he may find his way back to her.

Stanza 4

□This was the port,□ the speaker says at the beginning of stanza 4. The tense of the verb is important. The speaker does not say, □this *is* the port.□ She speaks in the past tense, implying that she and the newly dead will not meet at the port again. The poem continues □this bright uneasy harbor where we never / completely set anchor.□ The word □bright□ suggests happiness, but the word □uneasy□ is unsettling, suggesting conflict. The couple has not □set anchor□ in the port, has not put down roots, has not decided to call the port home. The speaker continues, □I understand the implacable clichés now.□ The word □implacable□ means callous or hard-hearted. A cliché is a worn-out phrase that has lost its original impact because it has been overused. Despite the callousness and worn-out quality of the words, which the speaker insinuates she once glanced over without giving them much thought, the speaker has come to understand the meaning behind the cliché □Its imperfection is its beauty.□ It must relate to the harbor, because both the cliché and the mention of the harbor are in the same stanza. That the harbor is both bright and uneasy may explain its imperfection and thus its beauty. However, the speaker also may be suggesting that when someone dies, all

his imperfections take on a certain element of beauty, that flaws are suddenly forgiven because one's heart longs so wildly to be reunited with the lover.

Stanza 5

Like stanza 2, stanza 5 begins with a fragmented sentence, the beginning of which, □How instinctively we,□ ends stanza 4. The speaker continues, □defend the poor illusions of that beauty.□ Because the speaker refers to the dead as □they□ up to this point in the poem, her use of the pronoun □we□ in this phrase must refer to the living. Therefore the living are defending the illusion of beauty. This notion may amplify the interpretation of how the living create illusions of what their now-dead loved ones were like when they were alive. The speaker adds □the limitations of the present□ as if qualifying or adding to the phrase □poor illusions of that beauty.□ Are the limitations of the present also poor illusions? Or is it because of the limitations of the present that the living defend the poor illusions? It is not totally clear, so a leap of faith or a creative interpretation is required of the reader. What is clear is the contrast between the □great canyons of the infinite□ (stanza 3) to which the newly dead have gone and the □limitations of the present□ to which the living are confined. With these two statements, the speaker insinuates that the newly dead are much freer than the living. She also insinuates that the consciousness of the dead is more expanded than that of the living, who are still defending □poor illusions.□

The rest of stanza 5 describes □colored paper lanterns . . . strung along our side.□ The lanterns are probably a reference to the Buddhist practice, especially prevalent in Japan and in Asian American communities, in which paper lanterns representing the souls of the dead are sent back to their side. The speaker once again refers to □our side,□ to signify the contrast between the living and the dead. The speaker explains that the lanterns are used □because we like the red-gold light, the pure ornament.□ The candlelight of the lanterns is warm (□red-gold□), and the □pure ornament□ may be a reference to the body□warmth, red, and ornament together produce an image of flesh and blood. The living wear their bodies as ornament. The dead no longer need such things. This feeling is carried into stanza 6.

Stanza 6

The first line of stanza 6, □and because we insist on the desire of the lost to remember us,□ completes the explanation of the use of lanterns begun in stanza 5. The living want to be remembered by the dead. The ornament, or the body, is worn to make the living visible. The next line, □to recognize the shape of our small flames,□ also emphasizes this notion. The contrast of the living as small and the dead as infinite is insinuated.

The poem then repeats some of the previous images: water, which is first mentioned in stanza 1, and candles, which are suggested in the mention of paper lanterns in stanza 5. A brighter illumination is brought forward, that of □bright beams□ that are □scanning.□ There is also the mention of □searchboats.□ The search boats may be

metaphorical or may be imagined by the speaker, who desperately wants to find the person who has died. The bright beam may be merely a flashlight that the speaker carries.

Stanza 7

The speaker's "Unstoppable need for solace" is a reference to crying and longing and an unfulfilled need to be comforted. The need is unstoppable because it is impossible for the speaker to be reunited with her departed. This impossibility explains the next phrase, "that hunger for the perfect imperfect world." The statement is a contradiction. Nothing can be perfect and imperfect at the same time. The speaker craves something that cannot exist.

Part of the speaker, her rational side, understands the impossibility. Her emotional side, however, continues to long for the impossible. In the next line, however, some of the speaker's rationality returns: "Still I sometimes think that you are too far away now." The speaker continues to hope that the newly dead person can return, but she also rationally understands that the person is too far gone to return or "to recall anything of our side"not even that day we saw human forms," and the poet ends the stanza.

Stanza 8

Once again, the first line of the stanza is a continuation of the thought begun in the last line of the previous stanza. The speaker ends stanza 7 with "human forms" and begins stanza 8, "suspended over the sea." At first these phrases provide a strange image. Readers have been led to believe that the speaker is walking along the shore, searching for faces, looking once again for the newly dead, who have gone to the other side. The image of the speaker's searching along the shore, wanting to see a physical human form, suddenly shifts to an image of "human forms suspended over the sea." This eerie image in some ways fulfills the speaker's longing. She is searching, and suddenly physical forms appear. The poem is misleading, however. The human forms are not hanging freely over the sea but are attached to hang gliders.

In the last stanza, the speaker goes back in memory. She is no longer wandering the beach alone. She is with the person who has died, and she is remembering their love rather than being lost in her sorrow. She has turned her search around. It may be that in her search the speaker is reminded of another time, a happier time when she strolled on the beach with someone she loved. She sees the sunset and the "old beach hotel," an image that suggests that the couple was on vacation. The hang gliders are symbolic of their love, "all our shining ambivalent love airborne there before us."

Themes

Longing

The word □longing□ occurs only once in □Our Side,□ and the word is associated with the newly dead, not with the speaker. However, even in the one instance, in the first line of stanza 2□□tenderness and longing lose direction□□the reader can feel the ache of loneliness that longing produces in the speaker. The speaker is calling out to the subject of the poem, the newly dead, and waiting for a response. She realizes that she is calling into a void, and therefore she says that the longing has lost direction. In other words, the longing is not reciprocal. The newly dead person no longer is craving. It is only on □our side,□ the side of the living, that the longing still exists.

Although □longing□ does not appear elsewhere in the poem, the theme continues to be represented. There is □endless calling,□ which would be done by people who are yearning for something. Longing is also represented in the line □and because we insist on the desire of the lost to remember us.□ Why would the living insist that the dead remember them? There is a craving for nostalgia, a kind of homesickness. The living want to return to a point in their lives when the dead were still alive. There is another sense of longing in this phrase and in the desire to be remembered. It is the awareness of their own mortality that people feel when they face the death of a loved one. Suddenly death, which has been only a fleeting thought, stares the person left behind in the face. The longing is a desire to stay alive, of not wanting to face a personal death. It is ironic that the feeling may also be a longing to die, to join the newly dead, assuring that the newly dead person will not forget the one left behind.

Death

Death is an inevitable unknown. Poets, philosophers, and probably all adults with an imagination try to conjure up what death means. Death is the force behind □Our Side.□ The speaker is trying to come to grips with where her loved one has gone. She tries to conjure up a place where his spirit dwells, and she tries to envision what it may be doing. She wants to know whether death means that the love they once shared also has died. She wants to know whether any of the emotions she shared with her loved one remain in an after-death existence.

Death is represented by the □great expanse of water□ and by the □great canyons of the infinite.□ The □lost sailor□ has set sail from the □port,□ or the □bright uneasy harbor where we never / completely set anchor.□ Life, in other words, is an □uneasy harbor□ in which an anchor is never truly set. Death has proved to the speaker that life is transitory, or temporary. Death is also represented in the □colored paper lanterns,□ a symbol of the festival of the dead that is practiced by Buddhists.

Love

□Our Side□ is about death and mourning, but its power is in what lies behind the dramatic moments□a deep love is being expressed. Without that love, there would be no longing, there would be no □endless calling,□ and there would be no living lover calling out the name of the deceased. When she wants to be remembered by the newly dead, the speaker is not talking through her ego, wanting to be recognized in that way. She wants her love to be remembered. In particular, she wants the feeling of love to be returned. Love causes pain if it is one-sided. The speaker once had someone to love, but that someone has gone, and she wonders where he has gone. How far away is he? Can he still see and hear her? Does he still love her? What is she supposed to do with the love inside her heart? These unspoken questions are the basis of the poem.

Confusion

An element in □Our Side□ is confusion. The first word in the poem is □Disoriented.□ The speaker is referring to the newly dead person, but all of the thoughts are supposedly coming from the speaker. Who really is disoriented? The speaker states that the newly dead are disoriented and try to turn back but cannot. This confusion may be the speaker's about an underlying hope of reincarnation, the belief that people die and are reborn in another form, a sort of turning back to life. The speaker, however, is not sure whether she truly believes in reincarnation. She wants a sign that it is possible. The speaker senses, however, that the newly dead person, whom she addresses in this poem, is drifting farther and farther away. Nevertheless, she ceaselessly calls out to him. She is not completely sure.

Even though she calls out, the speaker states that □their names fall away into the great canyons / of the infinite.□ Again she is torn between two beliefs. She calls out, intuitively knowing that doing so is a senseless endeavor, but the calling out remains □endless.□ In an effort to reach the newly dead, the speaker asks: □What shall I call you now . . . ?□ Although she feels that the practice of calling out is useless, instead of stopping it, the speaker believes that maybe she has been calling out the wrong name. Maybe if she changes the way she is calling out, the dead will finally hear.

Style

Enjambment

Enjambment is used in poetry to create a sense of tension. It occurs when the full sense of a line is interrupted because it is carried over to the next line. Sometimes enjambment leads to a change in meaning. In reading a phrase and then stopping at the end of a line, readers may gain a certain understanding of what the poet is trying to say. When the part carried over to the next line is read, the understanding changes.

Examples of enjambment in □Our Side□ include the break in stanza 1. The poem begins □Disoriented, the newly dead try to turn back, / across the great expanse of water. But the distance,□ and the second line stops. At this point, □the distance□ appears to refer to the □great expanse of water.□ This image is strong in the reader's mind. It suggests a sense of staring out at sea and imagining how far away the horizon is. The horizon can never be reached, so this □great expanse of water□ represents a distance related to infinity. The third line offers a surprise. It is not the distance of the great expanse of water but rather the distance □inside each of them, steadily growing.□ In the reader's mind, the infinite sense of reaching the horizon switches to the infinite expanse growing inside the newly dead. The poet does not have to describe or explain what she means by the distance inside each of them, because she provides the reader with the image of the sea.

Visual Effects

□Our Side□ is divided into stanzas of two, three, and four lines (distichs, tercets, and quatrains, respectively). Because there is no formal rhyme or meter in this poem and because the meaning of one line is often completed in the next line, there is no formal reason for the poem to be broken into stanzas of two, three, and four lines. There is also no set pattern to how the stanzas are formed. This poem is free flowing, so why has the poet divided it into distichs, tercets, and quatrains? The visual appearance of the lines on the page may be meant to enhance the meaning of the poem. An argument in favor of the poet's use of visual effects to enhance meaning is that she also alters the right-left alignment of the poem's lines. Most of the lines are aligned with the left margin. Only the last lines of the first three stanzas are aligned with the right margin. There is quite a bit of space between the left margin and the beginning of these three lines.

The variation in alignment gives the poem a look of waves, which may relate to the water that separates the newly dead from those who are alive. It also offers an effect of something being pulled away, because the type is pulled away from the left margin. An underlying tone in the poem is that of the newly dead being pulled away from the living. The three lines that are aligned with the right margin read □them away at last,□ □Despite our endless calling,□ and □What shall I call you now, lost sailor?□ These lines have something in common, and that may be why the poet has set them apart.

The newly dead are being drawn away, even though the living are endlessly calling to them. They newly dead are not responding, perhaps, the speaker wonders, because she is not calling out the right name. She is also not completely sure that the newly dead person to whom she is calling is aware that he is going away. Therefore she refers to him as a lost sailor.

The foregoing interpretation can be based merely on the way the poet has placed her lines on the page, demonstrating that visual form can provide extra meaning to a poem. A poem is more than just its words, a quality that sets poetry apart from other forms of writing. Not only is each word carefully chosen for meaning, song, and rhythm, but also each work is carefully placed on the page.

Symbolic Language

Muske-Dukes uses symbolic language in an attempt to describe the abstract concept of death. She refers to the □great expanse of water□ between the two sides: the side of death and the side of life. She calls the dead person a □sailor,□ as if death were a journey across that great expanse of water. She continues with the concept of death's being something very large when she refers to death as □the great canyons of the infinite.□ This image is a different type of expanse, so infinitely large that the living cannot cross it. The different kind of □distance□ inside a dead person is that which □draws them away.□ The distance represents death but also may be a reference to a soul, which in some belief systems is humankind's connection with the infinite.

The mention of a port symbolically refers to life. Life is a port in the journey of the soul. The soul, however, never puts down a permanent anchor in life. The speaker insinuates that the journey is much more significant than life alone. In other words, the speaker believes in an afterlife, which is represented as the □infinite.□ Life, in comparison, is finite and small, like the □shape of our small flames.□ The speaker uses hang gliders as symbols of the affection and passion, the □shining ambivalent love,□ between her and her lover. The hang gliders, not quite in heaven and not quite on earth, are an emblem of how the speaker envisions the couple's love and how their love made her feel□elevated, or □suspended□ in space.

Historical Context

Obon and Toro Nagashi: Festival of the Dead

The speaker in □Our Side□ mentions □colored paper lanterns□ while remembering her dead lover. In Japan, an annual holiday incorporates welcoming the spirit of the dead back to earth and then sending the spirits back to the other side. The festival, Obon, is celebrated from August 13 through August 15 and encompasses Buddhist observances that honor the spirits of everyone's ancestors. *Obon* means □festival of the souls.□ The observance began in China and was brought to Japan in the seventh century.

During Obon, great fires are lit, so the spirits can see their way home. Food offerings are made to entice the spirits, and traditional folk dances are performed to make the spirits feel at home. At the end of the Obon, paper lanterns are lit during a part of the festival called Toro Nagashi. The lanterns are placed on small, floating platforms, and prayers are written on papers that are then placed on the lanterns. These prayers are intentions that the spirits rest in peace. The lanterns on their floating platforms are set adrift on a river or in the ocean. The lanterns float down the river or out to sea, showing the spirits their way back to the other side. Many people in Japan believe in the supernatural powers of the dead and respect the fact that their ancestors' spirits can affect their own lives.

David Dukes

Muske-Dukes dedicates her collection *Sparrow* to her husband, David Dukes, who died in 2000. Dukes was a stage, film, and television actor in more than thirty productions, including *The Josephine Baker Story* (1991), for which he was nominated for an Emmy Award. In 1980, Dukes was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Featured Actor in a Play for his role in *Bent*. Dukes was well known for his roles in made-for-television movies and popular television series. He appeared in the miniseries *The Winds of War* (1983) and had guest roles in the television series *Ally McBeal* in 1999, *Law and Order* in 2000, and *Dawson's Creek*, playing Mr. McPhee from 1998 to 2000.

Dukes was born on June 6, 1945, in San Francisco. He began his acting career in 1971, in a Broadway production of *School for Wives*. Dukes died on October 9, 2000, while playing tennis, having taken a day off from filming the television miniseries *Rose Red*. Ironically, Muske-Dukes was only months away from completing *Life after Death* (2001), her novel about a woman who wishes her husband to die, which he does on a tennis court. Dukes died of an apparent heart attack, something he had advised his wife, while she was writing her novel, could very well happen to a tennis player because of the cardiovascular exertion that occurs during the game. Muske-Dukes has been reported as saying that she felt that her having created this scenario in her novel somehow caused it to happen to her real-life husband. The couple had one child.

Women and Poetry

The speaker in □Our Side□ is a woman remembering her dead lover. Critics have often deemed women's poems too personal and overly emotional, and women have struggled to claim authenticity in the realm of poetry. Women poets have been criticized for emphasizing the domestic realm, and this point is used to demean their work. Only since the middle of the twentieth century have the frequently autobiographical and personal poems of women been sanctioned and recognized as important expressions worthy of study.

Putting the issue of women and poetry in perspective is the poet Audre Lorde (1934-1992), who wrote nine books of poetry. In her essay □Poetry Is Not a Luxury,□ which was published in *By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry* (2000), Lorde presents her view of women writing poetry and the importance of this act. She writes,

I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean□in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight.

Lorde believed that for women, □poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence.□ For women, poetry is a form through which their fears and hopes are named. By exploring these feelings through poetry, women create □the most radical and daring of ideas.□ Without poetry, Lorde believed, women might not be able to put those feelings into words. She writes, □Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives.□

Lorde believed that the old concept of the head's (rational thought) ruling or forming poetry was an idea that women were forced to accept. Because of this long-held concept, emotions were relegated to a lower class, one less important, less authentic than the world of thought. Lorde writes,

For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive. . . . Feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men.

Women's power, Lorde believed, was long hidden because of denial and denigration of women's emotions. It is through feelings and their exploration in poetry that women will discover freedom.

Critical Overview

□Our Side□ was published in the collection *Sparrow*, which was a National Book Award finalist in 2003. In his review of the book in *Publishers Weekly*, Michael Scharf describes the collection as follows: □Longing and grief produce concentrated moments of terse, wry observations on grief.□ Scharf points out that □the best poems [in this collection] capture the darkly ambiguous ruminations of a partner left behind.□

Most of the poems in *Sparrow* are about or are addressed to Muske-Dukes's late husband. Ken Tucker, in the *New York Times Book Review*, describes the collection as follows:

These poems, most of them forthrightly about the death of the author's husband . . . are at once extravagantly emotional in content and tightly controlled as verse, two qualities that echo the extremes of the committed romance described throughout *Sparrow*.

Kevin Craft, in Seattle's weekly publication *The Stranger*, says that he has been a fan of Muske-Dukes's poetry over the years. Knowing that this collection of poetry is focused on the emotions the poet feels after her husband's death, Craft admits that he was not looking forward to reading the poems in *Sparrow*. Although Craft has long admired Muske-Dukes's □tough-minded, elegant lyricism,□ he is wary of what this collection may contain. □The title seemed, well, slight for such weighty subject matter, and I didn't relish the prospect of page after page of personal grief,□ Craft writes. He continues, □My initial skepticism, however, was quickly and irrevocably disarmed.□ Although the poems are □deeply personal,□ Craft finds the collection □an intricate marriage of dramatic and lyric voices, grief so acutely rendered it prefigures centuries of love and loss.□

Fred L. Dings, in *World Literature Today*, also finds more than grief in Muske-Dukes's poetry. □These poems never seem to succumb to the common pitfalls of gilding sentimentality or staged public expressions of bereavement,□ Dings writes. Rather, Dings finds □page after page of convincingly honest, accurate sentiment pitched tonally just right.□ Rather than sentimentality, Dings finds the strongest emotion in these poems to be □love, always love.□ In terms of language and style, Dings calls Muske-Dukes's poems □carefully crafted,□ but that craft □never becomes self-conscious to the point of undermining the core, driving sentiment.□

Barbara Hoffert, in *Library Journal*, mentions a line from one of Muske-Dukes's poems in which the poet asks about the difference between love and grief. Hoffert points out that although Muske-Dukes does not provide any easy answers to this question, readers soon discover that her poems about love and grief □bring you to tears with her evocation of both.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Joyce Hart is a published author and former writing instructor. In this essay, she looks at how Muske-Dukes avoids sentimentality in writing about love and loss.

Muske-Dukes's □Our Side,□ from her collection *Sparrow*, is about love and loss, a combination that could make anyone cringe. A person who experiences love and loss is often overwhelmed by the emotional effects of the tragedy. People trying to come to grips with heartbreak can talk about it with friends, family, or counselors, or they can write about it. Writing can provide a catharsis□a purification, or purging, of the emotional tension. However, writing produced under trying conditions can be saturated with melodrama and sentimentality. These qualities may be necessary for the psychology of the person who is writing the material, but they are not easy for outsiders to digest. Because the emotions are near the surface and overpowering in most material written by authors who are suffering, the feelings in the material tend to lose their impact on people who read it. In these cases, the author is said to be too close to the material to have an objective stance. In other words, the emotions are still too raw. The emotions are true and real, but the author cannot see beyond the feelings, cannot grasp meaning from them.

Readers tend to rebel against writing that is too sentimental or overwrought with anguish. Writing of this type (overly dramatic soap operas, for example) can come across as a mockery of the emotions the material is attempting to portray, or else it comes across as too difficult or too uncomfortable to look at or to even think about. Although people outside a tragedy may want to empathize with the victim of an unfortunate event, they tend not to want to be dragged into all the deeply personal psychological distress that the victim is suffering. The critic Kevin Craft writes in *The Stranger* that when he picked up *Sparrow* as he was preparing to review it, he □was wary□ of the grief he might find there. Craft was surprised, however, as he began reading. He and several other book reviewers have found that Muske-Dukes has been able to portray her grief objectively, without sentimentality and melodrama.

A device Muske-Dukes uses to dissipate the overwhelming feeling of loss is to create a division of realms, □our side□ (of the living) and their side (of the dead). This reaction is a common one when someone suffers the death of a loved one. The dead person is gone, but where is □gone□? All the living person knows is that □gone□ is not here. The separation and unknowing create the sense of loss and longing. To minimize the sense of loss, Muske-Dukes portrays the speaker as wondering whether the newly dead experience a similar emotion. Are the newly dead trying to turn back? the speaker of this poem wonders. Are they as disoriented as those they have left behind? In a strange way, as in the old saying that misery loves company, the thought that the dead also suffer passionate longing gives comfort to those who are left behind. At the beginning of □Our Side,□ the speaker, rather than screaming at the top of her lungs, gnashing her teeth in anguish, and pulling her hair out in frustration, imagines what death must be like. This reaction is easier for readers to take. It makes readers wonder about death rather than focus on the pain of separation.

The first stanza contains a reference to spirituality in which the concept of an afterlife is established. The speaker refers to the □distance / inside each□ of the newly dead. This space is □steadily growing□ inside the newly dead, pulling □them away at last.□ This image offers solace to the speaker. Something inside the newly dead person is taking him away from her. The speaker infers that the dead person is not leaving of his own accord. Something more powerful than the material world is calling to him, enticing him. Because the speaker and the newly dead person have shared love, the image suggests that whatever is calling the dead lover is even greater than the love the couple has shared. If the call is that strong, the speaker seems to conclude, there is nothing that she can do about it. Although she never names the distance inside the newly dead lover, readers can fill in the blank with their own spiritual beliefs. The distance may be a god figure. It may be a return to the source of all energy from which life is created. The image implies that something happens beyond death, that there is another realm. The image keeps alive the speaker's hope that one day she may be reunited with her lover. It also keeps her from focusing on her anguish.

In the second stanza, instead of crying out in anger at the departed person (an anger that is often stirred in those left behind, as if a loved one's death is a curse upon the living), the speaker seems accepting of her fate. As she looks at her emotions objectively, she discovers an image that helps her to announce, □Tenderness and longing lose direction, all terror / and love in the cells slowly dissipate.□ The speaker understands her lover's leaving, and she accepts the fact that the tenderness and longing that once were shared are hers alone. The speaker acknowledges that the love the couple enjoyed together is slowly dissolving, as her lover's body is decomposing. The poet looks at this process not through her emotions but through her intellect. She feels the loss, but in many ways she understates what she is experiencing. Through understatement of emotions and through imagery, readers are encouraged to embellish the feelings the speaker is suggesting. Instead of turning readers away with overemphasis, the poet invites readers to fill in the gaps, to imagine what the speaker is feeling and what the readers would feel if they were in the same situation. This style is much better than pouring out emotions and drowning readers in mournful details□a style that would turn most readers away.

Although □Our Side□ is about death and loss, the most prevalent theme is love□the loss of love and the celebration of love. Celebration, in this instance, is not related to giving a party, playing loud music, and enjoying food and drink (although in some cultures people celebrate death in this way). In this poem, the celebration is a quiet one. Like quiet waters, the celebration of love runs deep.

The speaker wants to be remembered, but not for herself or for what she shared with her lover. She wants to make sure that despite death, the love she shared with her lover will never be forgotten: □. . . we insist on the desire of the lost to remember us, / to recognize the shape of our small flames.□ The love the couple shared may be small in relation to the spirit world to which the dead belong, but for the speaker that love is all she has left. She does not want the flame to go out. Although the love and longing may be dissipating in terms of the person who has died or is being overshadowed by the unnamed experience that the dead lover is going through, the speaker tries to remind

herself that she alone must keep the love alive. She is worried that her lover is □too far away now / to recall anything of our side.□ In her reminiscing about the day the couple saw the hang gliders, she is reminding herself of their love.

In the last two lines of the poem, the speaker is not merely reminding herself of the day at □the old beach hotel,□ she is also creating an image that will help her remember the love that the couple once shared. She sees, in her mind's eye, the hang gliders and relates them to the love she must newly define. The hang gliders will represent □all our shining ambivalent love.□ The use of the word □ambivalent□ suggests the speaker's inability to fully define the love, especially because her lover is no longer available to provide his portion of it. The use of □ambivalent□ also may suggest other elements present before the lover died. However, it seems not to matter at this point. The speaker appears to be able to see the □human forms / suspended over the sea□ as a metaphor for where she and her lover are at this point. The love is present□suspended and undefined. Although death has interrupted the love, or redefined it, the love remains visible, at least in the speaker's heart and mind.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on □Our Side,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

David Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, he examines two elements of the poem that Muske-Dukes uses to bridge the gulf between the living and the dead: the final couplet and the use of pronouns.

It is unlikely that a reader could make it very far into Muske-Dukes's collection of poems *Sparrow* with no awareness of the biographical story behind it: the book is built of poems about grief, raw and processed, that came out of her own experience of sudden, tragic, early widowhood. To some extent, knowing about the poet's loss enriches readers' experience, causing them to read the poems with a heightened sense of their emotional pedigree. It can, however, be distracting to focus too much on the real life story behind the works at the expense of the works themselves. These poems are crafted and emotionally complex, requiring no background to confirm their legitimacy; in fact, giving too much attention to the sorrow that brought them into being can sap them of their individual identities. Muske-Dukes is a first-rate poet who would have something important to say about any subject. After a first reading, with the initial impressions that it evokes, readers should experience the deft skill that makes it possible for Muske-Dukes to translate her experience from author to reader.

A fine example of Muske-Dukes's controlling hand as a poet can be found in one of the poems from the collection, □Our Side.□ In this poem, death is presented as a physical separation, with the recently deceased being ferried across a river, like the River Styx, to a distant shore. The title seems to place the living and the dead into different social groups, □us□ against □them,□ until the poem finally comes around to a point where space and identity converge. That the poem is certainly infused with grief is beyond question, but it would be a mistake to believe that an understanding of grief, in itself, qualifies a reader to understand the poem or that a lack of loss could prevent one from seeing what Muske-Dukes has to say. This is a poem about death, life, and memory, but even these grand subjects might not command the attention they deserve if it were not for the author's canny machinations.

As with any good poem, □Our Side□ has its stylistic elements so deeply embedded that it is hardly relevant to talk about form as a separate thing from meaning. There are, though, a few points that deserve to be looked at on their own, just to understand a little more clearly what makes this particular poem successful. They have to do with the poem's progression from hopelessness to despair and from the isolation that death imposes to the saving grace of memory.

For one thing, the poem ends with two lines that change the sense of the seven stanzas that preceded them. The first seven stanzas are generally three lines each, not counting a few half-lines. The brevity of the last stanza would in itself make the stanza stand out, but there is also the fact that its function has a familiar echo for poetry readers. This couplet functions in this poem in the same way that such a couplet would function in one of the world's most recognizable poetic forms, the sonnet: it brings closure to □Our

Side,□ punctuating the poem's imagery of despair with a coda that raises it in another direction.

In English sonnets, the significance of what is discussed in the first twelve lines is counterbalanced by the last two lines; they may restate what came before, but more often they add a new dimension to the discussion by introducing a contrasting image or idea. The reader has to consider the whole thing from a new perspective after this change in direction. The focus of □Our Side□ is, from the start, water, air, and ground, with the eye being drawn downward: □canyons / of the infinite,□ □this bright uneasy harbor,□ □candles and searchboats,□ and □bright beams scanning□ not the skies but □for faces.□ The imagery seems to struggle to lift itself away, to draw attention upward, but it is stuck, as if too laden with sorrow.

In addition to standing alone on the page, the final couplet distinguishes itself by presenting the same ideas of air, water, and earth in a new juxtaposition: the poet remembers a time when she and the deceased were together, uplifted by the vision of hang gliders floating ephemerally over the water, unencumbered by the weight of existence. Life, which is usually thought of as the more tangible, is remembered as being no heavier than death. The issue of separation that the poem raised at the beginning, with the deceased crossing over to the other side, is reconciled at the end, as boundaries are erased and life and death, ground and air, and shores of all types are looked at as □our□ side.

This transformation, which is abrupt in the poem's imagery, is brought along more gradually throughout □Our Side□ by the use of pronouns. Throughout the poem, Muske-Dukes refers to □us□ and □we□ in ways that change the poem's meaning, taking readers from the traditional separation of the living from the dead to an alignment of the poet with the one she has lost. The fact that the □we□ of the end of the poem is different from the □we□ of the beginning is no coincidence.

For its first few stanzas, the poem speaks directly to its reader, functioning as a sort of lecture about the behaviors of □the newly dead.□ That ends, though, at the end of stanza 3, when the □I□ is first referred to, bringing in the personal element. This line, which also has the first reference to the poetic □you,□ stands alone as a question. It is not clearly addressed to a particular person but could be taken as a meditation on the recent dead in general. This line is out of sync with the rest of the poem because it is an individual question, a self-supported sentence□an aside, or a question one might ask oneself but not say aloud. It is the last time that □I□ and □you□ are mentioned until the end.

Through most of the poem, the pronouns divide reality into two distinct camps: □our□ and □we□ or □them□ and □they.□ The early mention of □the newly dead□ establishes the identities of who these pronouns refer to. □They□ are those who have died, and □we□ would therefore be those who have remained in the land of the living. A line like □we insist on the desire of the lost to remember us□ helps to further this distinction, drawing a line between □the lost□ and □us.□ In the sort of nondistinct way that poetry

can treat its references, living and dead are members of different social circles, and they are unable to associate. That changes, though, in the end.

In the seventh stanza, □I□ and □you□ are mentioned, and there is no ambiguity about whom they mean: they are the poet and the person that the poet has lost. That same line uses the title words□□our side.□ This □our□ seems to place the speaker in opposition to the dead person, if □our□ is taken to mean the side of the living; it does not have to mean that, though. □Our□ could still include both members of the couple, as □we□ does, later in that same line.

The final couplet shows the two, mourner and mourned, together at some earlier time. The image conveyed is the contrast of all the images that came before: instead of being weighted down, the living are lighter than air; they fly over the water rather than being carried across it; and the source of light is not the longing lights set out along grief's shore but the sun still in the sky, though waning. There is no question whom the poet means by □us□ in the final line, □behind us and all our shining ambivalent love airborne there before us□: it is herself and the one who has died. Although this is a memory, it is presented at the end as such a powerful and important moment that it can negate, or at least equal, the loss of the present.

This is a poem about death, and, like any poem, it needs to make its subject abstract in order to make its meaning transferable from the writer to the reader. The fact that Muske-Dukes suffered a great loss is too often reported, as if that alone makes her meditation on death worth attention. What is more important is that she knows when to give her poem form□but not only a hint, allowing her to refer to tradition without being a slave to it□and how to use her words deftly, to make readers think about who is included.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on □Our Side,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Research the topic of death according to different beliefs. These beliefs can be taken from Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, or another religion. Contrast one or more of these beliefs with those of Buddhism. Look for details about an afterlife, reincarnation, and the existence of a soul. Write a paper and present your findings to your class.

Find pictures of the Japanese floating paper lanterns used during the Buddhist festival of the dead. Make a floating paper lantern that closely resembles the picture. Bring it to class and explain the significance of the celebration.

Research how various cultures honor the dead and write a paper about your findings. For example, look at how the celebration of Halloween began, how the Day of the Dead is celebrated in Mexico, or how the U.S. military honors fallen soldiers.

Write a poem about something you have lost. Practice understatement of your emotions concerning this loss. Rather than using adjectives to describe your emotions, create images that show how you feel.

What Do I Read Next?

In her collection of essays about women and poetry titled *Women and Poetry: Truth, Autobiography, and the Shape of the Self* (1997), Muske-Dukes reviews her own poetry written over approximately twenty years to discover her own changing attitudes about women and poetry.

In the novel *Life after Death* (2001), Muske-Dukes tells the story of a woman who, in a fit of anger, tells her husband to die. To her horror, he does, on the tennis court. This death is hauntingly similar to that of Muske-Dukes's husband, who died on a tennis court immediately before the publication of this novel.

Muske-Dukes's collection of essays *Married to the Icepick Killer: A Poet in Hollywood* (2002) captures moments in her life as an artist living in film-crazy Los Angeles. Muske-Dukes also writes about her marriage and the challenges two artists face in living together.

Jane Kenyon's *Collected Poems* (2005) is a tribute to Kenyon, who died at the age of forty-seven in 1995 but whose value as a poet has increased since her death. Kenyon is known as a down-to-earth poet. She writes equally honestly of her life and her depression.

Like Muske-Dukes, Jane Kenyon was involved in a somewhat famous marriage, to the poet Donald Hall. Hall's memoir of the marriage is *The Best Day the Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon* (2005).

A collection by another prize-winning poet is Mary Oliver's *Why I Wake Early: New Poems* (2004). Oliver's Pulitzer Prize-winning poems have a spirit behind them that is full of life and focused on beauty.

Further Study

Ikeda, Daisaku, *Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth and Death: And Everything in Between, a Buddhist View of Life*, 2nd ed., Middleway Press, 2004.

Daisaku Ikeda, a winner of the United Nations Peace Award, presents an easy-to-read and easy-to-understand introduction to Buddhism, which explores people's interconnectedness to one another and all things of the world.

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, *On Death and Dying*, Scribner, 1969, reprint, 1997.

This book is a classic study of the stages that people go through when they know they are dying. Kübler-Ross, a psychiatrist, devoted her life to dealing with the emotions of dying. By understanding what a dying person goes through, those who experience the loss of a loved one also gain insight into how to deal with their grief.

McQuade, Molly, ed., *By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry*, Graywolf Press, 2000.

In this collection of essays, women poets describe their creative writing and women's poetry in general.

Segal, Alan F., *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, Doubleday, 2004.

Every religion has its own definition or assumption of what happens after a person dies. Segal examines the beliefs about afterlife throughout the history of Western religions, from ancient Egyptian to contemporary Muslim, Jewish, and Christian beliefs.

Bibliography

Craft, Kevin, "The Sparrow, the Fall; Carol Muske-Dukes and the Awful Tangle of Language and Fate," in *The Stranger*, Vol. 13, No. 31, April 15-21, 2004, p. 49.

Dings, Fred L., Review of *Sparrow*, in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 78, No. 3-4, September-December 2004, pp. 101-102.

Hoffert, Barbara, "Best Poetry of 2003: Ten Titles, Four Collections from Major Poets, and Four Anthologies," in *Library Journal*, Vol. 129, No., 7, April 15, 2004, pp. 88-89.

Lorde, Audre, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry*, edited by Molly McQuade, Graywolf Press, 2000, pp. 365-66.

Muske-Dukes, Carol, "Our Side," in *Sparrow: Poems*, Random House, 2004, pp. 60-61.

Scharf, Michael, Review of *Sparrow*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 250, No. 25, June 23, 2003, p. 61.

Tucker, Ken, Review of *Sparrow*, in the *New York Times Book Review*, July 6, 2003, p. 20.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Poetry for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535