Paradoxes and Oxymorons Study Guide

Paradoxes and Oxymorons by John Ashbery

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Paradoxes and Oxymorons" originally appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* and was later published in John Ashbery's 1981 collection of poems *Shadow Train,* nominated for the American Book Award. A favorite both of the poet's and of editors', "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" has been widely anthologized. At one point Ashbery wanted the poem to be the title of the collection because he felt that it was the most accessible poem in the book. Written between March and mid-October 1979 in the poet's newly acquired Victorian-era house in upstate New York, *Shadow Train* contains fifty sixteen-line poems that some critics have likened to a sonnet sequence. Unlike sonnets, which consist of fourteen lines, Ashbery's poems have no set rhyme scheme, and Ashbery himself has said that he doesn't much like sonnets.

Typical of many of Ashbery's poems, and of much post-modern verse, it directs readers' attention to the words themselves, placing the language's materiality and the process of meaning making in the foreground. The poem, its speaker, and its readers all take part in this process. Paradoxes are statements that contain often inexplicable or contradictory elements that nonetheless may still be true in some way. For example, in the third line the speaker says of the poem, "You have it but you don't have it." Oxymorons are rhetorical figures in which contradictory terms are combined in a phrase, such as "jumbo shrimp," or such as "A deeper outside thing" at the beginning of the ninth line in Ashbery's poem.

Also typical of Ashbery's poetry is the high level of abstraction and self-questioning. His lines often suggest or echo other lines or ideas that readers "think" they know, only to shift suddenly to something altogether different. This is why many critics and general readers are often at a loss to describe what Ashbery's poems are "about." In many ways he can be read as a poet with no "real" subjects. Because Ashbery's poems rely heavily on associative thinking and connections between and among lines, images, and ideas are often tenuous at best, and critical interpretations of individual poems may yield little in the way of insight. Readers interested in grasping Ashbery's work would be better served by reading a complete collection of his poems, treating them as part of the longer poem of Ashbery's life's work.

Author Biography

Born in 1927 in Rochester, New York, to farmer Chester Frederick and Helen Lawrence Ashbery, John Ashbery grew up on a farm in western New York State near Lake Ontario. He attended Deerfield Academy before taking his B.A. from Harvard, where he was classmates with Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, and Kenneth Koch, all of whom came to be associated with the New York School of poets. An informal group of writers with an interest in making poetry funnier, more colloquial, and more contemporary, the New York School poets also shared a love of popular culture, studding their poems with images and allusions to movie stars, music, and film. After graduating from Harvard, Ashbery completed an M.A. in English from Columbia University, writing his thesis on Henry Green, a minor English novelist.

Passionate about painting as a teenager, Ashbery cultivated a love for writing and literature at Harvard. After winning a scholarship to France, he began writing about art for the *New York Herald Tribune* in Paris, supporting himself for a decade through his art criticism and translation projects. In 1956 W. H. Auden selected his first collection of poems, *Some Trees,* for the Yale Younger Poets Prize. Since then, Ashbery's reputation has blossomed, and he is now considered by some critics to be the most influential American poet of the last half of the twentieth century. Ashbery is not, however, without his critics. Because of his intensely abstract style in which he often experiments with syntactical structure, associative thinking, point of view, and subject matter, many readers find his poems impossible to grasp, and some suspect that at root he is being deliberately elusive in his meanings. Such a stance is also precisely what appeals to many other readers, who see in Ashbery a poet whose interest in capturing the randomness of experience and the part that language plays in that randomness a fresh kind of realism more in tune with life in the late twentieth century. Ashbery's poems often evoke feelings and thoughts but rarely have a determinate meaning that more than a few readers would agree on. His desire to include as much of the world as possible in his poems gives his writing an expansiveness few other contemporary poets share. Yet his refusal to pin the things of the world down to a meaning or set of meanings makes for an obscurity that some consider so much verbal posturing.

Along with French surrealism, modern painting and music have been strong influences on Ashbery's poetry. Abstract expressionists, action painters, and collagists of the 1950s, such as Willem de Kooning and Robert Rauschenberg, focused on the process of composition and the surface of the canvas, creating works that were non-representational and open to a multitude of interpretations. Ashbery's own crosscutting, experiments with associative imagery, stream-of-consciousness, and improvisational methods create similar surfaces, though verbal. His incorporation of random thoughts and images also echo the compositional methods of composers such as John Cage. In one of his more lucid poems, "What is Poetry?", Ashbery "answers" the title's question in his typically elusive manner, by asking more questions:

The medieval town, with frieze
Of boy scouts from Nagoya? The snow

That came when we wanted it to snow?
Beautiful images? Trying to avoid
Ideas, as in this poem? □

Poem Text

This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.
Look at it talking to you. You look out a window
Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don't have it.
You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.
The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot.
What's a plain level? It is that and other things,
Bringing a system of them into play. Play?
Well, actually, yes, but I consider play to be
A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern,
As in the division of grace these long August days
Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know
It gets lost in the stream and chatter of typewriters.
It has been played once more. I think you exist only
To tease me into doing it, on your level, and then you aren't there
Or have adopted a different attitude. And the poem
Has set me softly down beside you. The Poem is you.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1:

Paradoxes and oxymorons are rhetorical figures, and by naming the poem after them Ashbery is setting up readers' expectations to look for these figures. The first line is ironic, whether intentionally or not is unimportant. Any poem with the title "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" cannot be "concerned with language on a very plain level," as these figures of speech are themselves often difficult to understand. Ashbery's poems frequently contain a high degree of self-reflexivity, and this poem is no different. A poem is self-reflexive when it is its own subject, when it describes and explains itself. The speaker, who is one with the poem, directs readers to witness the poem talking to them and "scripts" the reader's response: "You look out a window / Or pretend to fidget." The image of "fidgeting" speaks to the intense self-consciousness of the speaker and of human beings in general, especially those in romantic relationships. It echoes the kind of response someone might have in an awkward conversation with his or her lover. The next sentence, "You have it but you don't have it," is itself a paradox, that is, a statement that contains terms or ideas that on the surface appear to be irreconcilable. Ashbery here refers to the process of meaning-making in reading a poem. Readers, especially those unfamiliar with contemporary poetry, sometimes think they "get" the poem but then think they don't. On a different level, these lines also echo the ways in which human beings communicate with one another, the way they frequently "miss" each other's meanings and intentions.

Stanza 2:

The first line is silly and sentimental if readers think of poems as inanimate objects, which cannot feel or desire. More likely, Ashbery is poking fun at the idea of sentimentality. However, it also speaks, again, to the idea of meaning and comprehension, a reader's own struggle to "possess" language, and a lover's desire to possess another. The speaker refers back to his own statement in the first stanza when asking, "What's a plain level?" Such self-interviewing draws readers deeper into the poem, forcing them to pay closer attention to their own thinking processes. The "that" refers to "plain level" itself. By stating, in essence, that a plain level is a plain level, Ashbery is being tautological, that is, redundant. "Other things" is left undefined. Continuing with his method of making statements and then questioning those very statements, Ashbery introduces the notion of "play," again referring to the very thing that he is doing in the poem itself. The introduction of the "I" into the poem in the last line brings another element into play, the author. Ashbery builds meaning through suggestion and through asking questions, but he never answers them directly. The accumulation of statements and questions, of assertions and qualifications, of abstractions without referents, gives the poem texture, makes it dreamlike, surreal.

Stanza 3:

The "outside thing" in the first line might refer to the world outside the poem itself, the world from which the poem springs. "A dreamed rolepattern" suggests both structure *and* randomness, which the poet suggests is the stuff of "play." The second and third lines are enigmas, that is, Ashbery gives no clue as to how "a dreamed rolepattern" and "the division of grace these long August days / Without proof" are similar. One possibility is that Ashbery finished composing the poem during August. In his endnotes on *Shadow Train,* John Shoptaw lists the composition date of "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" as July 29, which is close enough to support this theory. August is also considered by many to be the slowest month of the year, when summer is at its height. This would account for the description of the month as "long." Ashbery underscores the poem's own sense of play by making "Openended" its own sentence and enclosing it in the middle of a line. "The steam and chatter of typewriters" is the most concrete image in the entire poem and throws the reader into the world of things, as opposed to ideas.

Stanza 4:

The poet, the poem, and the reader are all in play in this final stanza. The "it" in the first line is, presumably, the poem. Ashbery appears to liken it to a piece of music, which can also be "played." The "I" makes its second and final appearance in the first line of this stanza, thinking of "you," presumably the reader. It is important to note that "you" can also mean the speaker himself. The use of the second person to address another part of the speaker has a rich history in poetry, and Ashbery plays with this convention. The poet writes with the idea of the reader in mind ("I think you exist only / To tease me into doing it"), an idea that changes as he composes the poem. The poem mimics the dance of lovers, a dance that frequently includes indecision, playfulness, and evolving attitudes. In the final lines, poem, reader, and speaker conflate into one entity. The processes, both of composing the poem and of reading the poem, are included in the idea of the poem.

Themes

Language and Meaning

"Paradoxes and Oxymorons" questions the idea that language is an effective tool for communicating ideas about the physical, empirically verifiable world. The poem suggests that poetry, and by extension all language, is ultimately about itself and its inability to say anything definitive about the world. The first stanza underscores this idea, as the poem eludes the understanding of the reader: "You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other." These words also echo the way that lovers frequently misunderstand one another, showing how language is often at a distance from things. By making the poem into a lover of sorts, a lover who can never be fully understood or possessed by the reader, Ashbery shows how language also makes promises, promises that often go unfilled. The self-questioning in the second stanza dramatizes the notion that even the speaker is not in control of what he says. Language seems to have a mind of its own, separate from that of the speaker. After asking himself, "What's a plain level?", the speaker responds, "It is that and other things." The speaker's very inability (or unwillingness) to adequately define the term "plain level" underscores the impossibility of definitive meaning. Using pronouns such as "it" and "that"—which refer only back to themselves—underscores the self-reflexivity of language. This means that language can only point back to itself, and not to the world of things, which human beings often assume is what language does. Similarly, the "Steam and chatter of typewriters," highlights the material production of words for its own sake, without paying attention to the meaning of these words. In case the reader missed it during the first three stanzas, the final stanza hammers home the idea that the reader has quite literally been "played," that is, the poem, by hinting at meaning and then withdrawing further into muddy abstractions, toys with the reader's expectations and processes of meaning-making.

Appearances and Reality

"Paradoxes and Oxymorons" illustrates the idea that the world is never quite what it seems to be; appearances are deceptive. Greek philosopher Plato addresses this idea in *The Allegory of the Cave,* claiming that human beings live in the shadows of the real world. "Paradoxes and Oxymorons," a poem included in a collection titled *Shadow Train,* is in itself obscure and elusive in nature. One of the central paradoxes of the poem is its relationship to reality. After establishing that the poem is "concerned with language on a very plain level," the speaker complicates that level, ultimately suggesting, in the third stanza, that the poem, like reality itself, is "a dreamed role pattern." The poem, like reality, is a form of play "without proof." This last phrase calls attention to the idea that perception itself is unreliable. What happens in reality is like what happens in this poem: Both are unpredictable; both contain random events.

Rather than representing reality, language is reality. The way in which human beings use it determines the ways in which they will perceive and experience the world. The final stanza underscores how the poem, itself a rarified form of language, has manipulated the reader's expectations and desires. The poem, like reality, is ultimately embodied in the reader. It exists because someone exists to read it.

Style

Sonnet

"Paradoxes and Oxymorons" is not a sonnet, but it approximates one in form and subject matter, and critics reviewing *Shadow Train* regularly comment on the collection as a variation on a sonnet sequence. Historically, sonnets consist of fourteen lines. The Petrarchan sonnet, named after the fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch, has an octave (eight lines) that rhymes *abbaabba,* and a sestet (six lines) that rhymes *cdecde* or sometimes *cdccdc*, while the English, or Shakespearean sonnet consists of three quatrains (four lines) that rhyme *abab cdcd efef*, and a couplet (two lines) which rhymes gg. "Paradoxes and Oxymorons," like the other forty-nine poems in the collection, consists of four unrhymed quatrains. Ashbery's poem, however, like many sonnets, takes love (loosely) as its subject.

Address

"Paradoxes and Oxymorons" addresses the reader, which is unusual but not unheard of in contemporary poetry. The use of the second person "you" is more common when used by the speaker to address another part of himself. Ashbery's poem complicates these two uses of "you." The reader can be both other people reading his poem and Ashbery himself as he reads along with it as he's composing. The conflation of "I," "you," and the poem at the end all contribute to the sense of playfulness and mystery in the poem's address.

Historical Context

The poems in *Shadow Train* were composed during an eight-month period between March and mid- October 1979. Ashbery, a New York City apartment dweller for his entire adult life, had just purchased a Victorian house in upstate New York. In his study of Ashbery's poetry, *On the Outside Looking Out,* John Shoptaw speculates that "With its multiple rooms, this house may have provided a blueprint for the many-chambered volume [i.e., *Shadow Train*]." In a *New York* magazine article, "Capital Gains," Ashbery likens the poems in Shadow Train to abstract art, saying, "These compositions go about their business as though dealing with the customary square or oblong containing frame, yet they are unexpectedly truncated and finally liberated by the soaring and diminishing implications of the diamond shape."

Music and art play major roles in Ashbery's composing processes. His house boasts paintings and artwork from friends such as Fairfield Porter, Alex Katz, and Willem De Kooning, all internationally known artists, and Ashbery frequently composes his poems while listening to music. In his interview with Ashbery titled "A Blue Rinse for the Language," Michael Glover writes that "The language of his books is informed by his roving enthusiasms for particular composers." In the same interview Ashbery states, "I've always felt myself to be a rather frustrated composer who was trying to do with words what musicians are able to do with notes□. The importance of meaning that's beyond expression in words is what I've always been attracted to." Shoptaw claims that "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" is similar to experimental music, writing that "What deepens Ashbery's level playing field are his random [John] Cagean procedures, a hugely varied 'division of labor' between the poet and language." John Cage, who died in 1992, used chance operations in writing his music and, in general, was a proponent of non-intentionality in com- position. Ashbery is well-known for saying that he has no desire to plumb the great metaphysical questions of existence but rather is interested in surface details and thoughts as they cross his mind. Ashbery, like many of the painters he admires and like Cage, is sometimes referred to as a postmodernist.

Postmodernism, a hotly debated term, refers to the radical experiments in the arts that took place after World War II. Some historians use the two world wars as markers for the beginnings of modernism and postmodernism. Some of the features commonly associated with postmodern literature and art include an attention to surface, as opposed to depth; a willingness to mix genres, mediums, and subject matter; a focus on the materiality of art, as opposed to the meaning of art; more attention paid to the process of composition than to the finished product; and an embrace of popular culture and forms of "low" art such as cartoons, popular music, and so forth. Like modernism, post-modernism often depicts human beings as alienated and often self-deluded and human life as having no inherent meaning. Artists, writers, and musicians often described as post-modernists include John Ashbery, Robert Rauschenberg, Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, Merce Cunningham, Steve Reich, Jeff Koons, and Andy Warhol.

Critical Overview

Shadow Train (1981), the collection in which "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" appears, received mixed reviews. In his study of Ashbery's poetry *On the Outside Looking Out,* critic John Shoptaw calls "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" the most popular poem in *Shadow Train* and notes that at one point Ashbery considered making it the title poem of the collection but then thought better of it when he realized that many readers might not know what an oxymoron was. Shoptaw writes that "The poem itself voices Ashbery's populist impulse to reach the common reader, who thinks poems are constructed on many interpretive levels." In his essay on Ashbery for *American Writers,* Shoptaw says that "Although *Shadow Train* is dwarfed by earlier volumes such as *Three Poems or As We Know,* it may be the right place to begin for the reader who wants to learn Ashbery's alphabet." Vernon Shetley, on the other hand, cautions new Ashbery readers not to begin with *Shadow Train*, writing that "it occupies a curious position in the evolving body of his [Ashbery's] work. This collection marks another peculiar twist in a protean career, another of the seemingly willful swerves from his natural predispositions that discomfit his admirers almost as much as his detractors." Ultimately, however, Shetley approves of the collection, writing that Shadow *Train shows* Ashbery "if not at his most daring and expansive, certainly at his most masterful." Later in the same article, he remarks that "*Shadow Train* is a permanent addition to American poetry."

Reviewing the volume for *Commentary,* Robert Richman isn't as kind. Richman claims that *Shadow Train* "parodies the national mood of retrenchment and specifically the new conservatism of form and representation in the arts." Writing that "the autonomy of language takes on an especially *jejune* cast" in the collection, Richman argues against Ashbery boosters, such as critic Helen Vendler, and suggests that the poet's popularity is undeserved and little more than a con game in which many people willingly participate.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

A widely published poet and fiction writer, Semansky teaches literature at Portland Community College. In the following essay, Semansky argues that Ashbery's "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" is a poem with indeterminate meaning.

Many people resist reading modern poetry because they think it is difficult to understand. They believe there is a hidden or secret meaning that must be ferreted out and that if they do not know the code, they will not understand what the poem is about. That poems are "about" something is an idea that much modern and contemporary poetry itself has questioned. Some recent literary theorists maintain that there is no absolute "aboutness," or theme, to literary texts, that ultimate meaning itself is an impossibility. Indeterminacy, these theorists argue, is the nature of literary texts, for their real meaning can never be known. John Ashbery's difficult and obscure poetry has helped to legitimize (and popularize) the idea of indeterminacy because it is so hard to pin down the subject of his poems. Ironically, his poem "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" literally plays with this very idea. The poem resists interpretation at the same time that it asks to be understood. This is one of its central paradoxes.

Readers are accustomed to poems being about an event, an idea, or an emotion. For example, William Shakespeare's sonnets are about his love for another person. Robert Frost's poems are about how human beings interact with the natural world. John Ashbery's poems, however, are about nothing in particular, but they often trick readers into believing that they are. In his essay "Indeterminacy," critic and theorist Gerald Graff states that "For many recent theorists the problems of meaning and interpretation are not only features of works of literature, but are also what works of literature are *about*. Literary works 'thematize' (or take as their theme) those conflicts that make them indeterminate—conflicts between the claims the works make to tell the truth, represent the world, and present an authoritative picture of things, and the way their status as language and fiction calls these claims into question. In other words literary works are at some level commentaries on their own indeterminacy." What better way to explain the nature of "Paradoxes and Oxymorons"?

The poem begins by making a declarative statement: "This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level." Readers might feel uncomfortable having a poem tell them what it is about, but this is the way that Ashbery lures readers into the poem, makes them participate in its unfolding. In this way, readers themselves become a necessary part of the poem's meaning. The poem could not exist without them. The poet puts a twist on the old philosophical question, "If a tree fell in the woods and no one was there to hear it, would it make a sound?" Ashbery asks, "If there were no reader, would there still be a poem?" His answer would be a resounding "No," for the poem is about language's interaction with the reader. Meaning emerges from that interaction. It is not a static thing, sitting there full of meaning and just waiting to be discovered.

William Carlos Williams, a twentieth-century American poet who argued for the primacy of the image in poetry, once said, "No ideas but in things." By this he meant that in poetry, meaning itself should come out of concrete descriptions of the empirical world and that description should be sufficient. Abstractions should be avoided at all costs. Ashbery is also interested in the "thingness" of poetry, but things for him can include abstract thoughts or phrases, things that cannot be seen, touched, tasted, heard, or felt. His material is language itself. He uses it like a painter would use color or line or light. The words themselves don't necessarily have to "add up" to any definitive or final meaning; rather, he plays meanings off one another as if he were composing a musical score. In his study of Ashbery's poetry, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry,* David Shapiro writes that for Ashbery "Poetry does not reflect reality; it constitutes reality□. Ashbery's poetry may seem to be a reflection upon a reflection upon a reflection, but it is actually a creation upon a creation□. One reads his surface only misguidedly if one thinks to commit merely the *orthodoxy* of paraphrase upon it." By this, Shapiro means that individual poems of Ashbery's do not lend themselves to paraphrase or summary and that a reader attempting to do so with his poems is foolish and missing the point. The "heresy of the paraphrase" is actually a phrase initially coined by a literary critic in the 1940s to suggest that *all* poetry is by its very nature "unparaphrasable." The reasoning here is that poetry exists precisely *because* there is no other form of expression to convey the complexities of feeling, thought, and experience that a poem can contain. Once one begins to paraphrase a poem, the poem automatically becomes something else.

The abundance of criticism on individual poems and the very idea that a poem can be reduced to "what it really means" is more a product of the institution of literary criticism and the place of criticism in the university system than a characteristic of poetry itself. It is the institution of criticism and the university system that categorizes writing into genres, traditions, periods, schools, movements, and the like, and it is precisely this categorization that Ashbery's work defies. Critics don't know what to do with him. They cannot agree upon a tradition in which to place him nor upon a movement or school to stamp above his name. In her introduction to an anthology of essays on Ashbery, *The Tribe of John Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry,* Ashbery scholar Susan Schultz writes that "There is a meditative Ashbery, a formalist Ashbery, a comic Ashbery, a late-Romantic Ashbery, a Language poet Ashbery□. No poet since Whitman has tapped into so many distinctly American voices and, at the same time, so preserved his utterance against the jangle of influences." The difficulty that readers have with individual Ashbery poems, then, extends to the difficulties that established institutions have in figuring out what to make of his writing.

Instead of having something to say, Ashbery's poems often have nothing to say, but insist on saying it. Instead of building up to a statement, they start off with possibility and gradually empty themselves of meaning. They seduce but often do not consummate their seduction. Look at the teasing nature of the second and third stanzas:

The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot.
What's a plain level? It is that and other things,
Bringing a system of them into play. Play?

Well, actually, yes, but I consider play to be
A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern,
As in the division of grace these long August days
Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know
It gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters.

The tactic of making a statement and then questioning that statement and then answering that question is common enough in Ashbery's poems. It also forces readers to question their own way of reading and meaning-making and to question the trust that they have placed in the speaker. For Ashbery never really "answers" questions he puts forward; in fact, he evades answers. Readers frequently wind up scratching their heads, wondering if they're missing something. Ashbery plays with readers' expectations, their expectations of what comes next, their expectations of what a poem is. To fully appreciate Ashbery's poetry, readers would do well to adopt the mindset of someone listening to jazz. Having no expectations, only the desire to play and be played by the poem, is the mindset to bring to his poems. If readers expect to glean some deep moral or metaphysical insight into the human condition from his poems, they will be disappointed and frustrated. John Shoptaw, author of *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry*, identifies some of the cultural and literary allusions that Ashbery's poem piles up in "playing" the reader:

If infinitely many monkeys are set before typewriters, the statistical paradox goes, they will sooner or later produce Shakespeare's plays. Ashbery's poem "has been played" like a record or a trick. But perhaps it is the reader's trick as well. In the communications system, the ideal reader now resembles the Divine Paradox: "I think you exist," the poet asserts, "and then you aren't there." In his final paradox, "the poem is you," varying the dedication "the poem is yours," Ashbery yields himself to the reader, who nevertheless continues to "miss" him.

Allusions are indirect references to other ideas and texts. Readers aren't always aware of allusions when reading poems, Ashbery's or others, but these allusions work on us at a deeper level. There is also nothing necessarily intentional about allusions. That is, Ashbery may or may not be aware of what he is alluding to when he writes his poems. He may or may not be alluding to the monkey paradox, or the Divine Paradox, that Shoptaw sees. What the reader is left with at the end of "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" and, for that matter, many of Ashbery's poems, is the idea that language knows more than the reader does.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Pipkin is a scholar in the fields of British and American Literature. In this essay, he discusses the issues of meaning and interpretation in "Paradoxes and Oxymorons."

"Paradoxes and Oxymorons" is a poem about language. To be more specific, it is a poem concerned with how words come to have meaning and with the roles that poets and readers play in creating and determining that meaning.

"Paradoxes and Oxymorons" is a good example of a postmodern poem. Postmodernism is a broad and sometimes confusing term that includes many different styles, themes, and perspectives. As a general historical term, postmodernism refers to art and literature of the late twentieth century. Stylistically and thematically, postmodernism is often characterized by an awareness that there is no such thing as absolute meaning, and some postmodern works of art raise the question of whether or not art or poetry even exist. In addition, many postmodern poems look beneath the surface of language to point out inconsistencies or contradictions that seem to defeat the purpose of poetic language in the first place.

Ashbery's poem encourages the reader to consider such postmodern issues. The poem's title itself seems to suggest that the poem will be addressing issues of language, meaning, and contradiction. A "paradox" is a phrase that may at first appear absurd or contradictory, but it is one that, upon further consideration, actually makes sense. This is slightly different from an oxymoron, which is a phrase that contains an obvious contradiction for the purpose of making a point or teaching a lesson. By choosing this title, could Ashbery be suggesting that all of language is nothing more than a collection of oxymorons and paradoxes. Is every use of language a contradiction, or something other than what it at first seems to be?

The poem begins with two statements, which present the reader with impossible choices: (1) "This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level." Is this statement true? If the reader accepts this as true, then the second statement presents an impossible command. (2) "Look at it talking to you." How can you "look" at a poem "talking"? And for that matter, do words on a page actually speak? Already, by the second statement of the poem, there is a puzzling contradiction. And the complexity of this contradiction undermines the first line of the poem, which claimed that it was "concerned with language on a very plain level." A reader who accepted the first line as absolutely true has already been tricked. Clearly, the poem is not concerned with *plain* language.

But does this mean that the reader must declare the first sentence a lie? What if there really is no such thing as *plain* language to begin with? Or better yet, what if what we accept to be plain language is really no different from other forms of language, riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies?

The rest of the opening stanza looks at a different kind of inconsistency. "You look out a window / Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don't have it. / You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other." Here, Ashbery's poem describes the uncomfortable process that a reader goes through when trying to decipher a poem like this one. We yearn for distraction, look out a window, or pretend to fidget because we don't want to admit what we don't understand. Meaning comes to us in bits and pieces. Some of these we catch and some we miss. But Ashbery describes this process as a two way street. The meaning of the poem does not reside in the poem itself or in the reader's interpretation of it but somewhere in between. Meaning is the result of the poem and the reader reaching out to each other. "You miss each other." If a poem seems to be meaningless, who has failed: the reader, the poem, or both?

To understand what Ashbery is talking about in the second stanza, it is helpful to know a little bit about a literary theory known as deconstruction. In the late 1960s, the French linguistic theorist Jacques Derrida used the term deconstruction to refer to a very complex philosophical method for showing how language has no permanent meaning. Deconstructive critics argue that the meanings of words come from the way that they are used and from the way that they are related to a network or system of other words and statements. Derrida referred to the changing relationships between words as play. Thus, according to deconstruction, linguistic meaning comes from the play between words and statements and can never be nailed down permanently.

This is a disturbing idea because it suggests that we can never really know or prove what anyone is trying to say. In the second stanza of "Paradoxes and Oxymorons," Ashbery reflects on the implications of these ideas. "The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot be. / What's a plain level? It is that and other things, / Bringing a system of them into play." Ashbery suggests that poems, like poets, want to be understood but that they cannot be understood because of the limitations of language. Thus, language itself is both a means of expression as well as an obstacle to expression. An interesting paradox!

Here Ashbery also asks the question that the first stanza overlooks: "What's a plain level?" A poem cannot exist on a plain level because language is always working on more than one level at the same time. Words and phrases always have more than one meaning. They are always both "that and other things." By using language, Ahsbery's poem cannot express a specific meaning without bringing into play an entire system of words, including those that are not on the page. The meaning of the poem is dependent upon the system of words outside of the poem itself, perhaps in the mind of the reader as well.

The third stanza continues the reflection on the idea of "play" started at the end of the second stanza. "Play? / Well, actually, yes, but I consider play to be / A deeper outside thing, a dreamed rolepattern, / As in the division of grace these long August days / Without proof. Open-ended." Ashbery compares different perspectives on play here. When he thinks of play, he does not think immediately of words but rather of the carefree, meaningless games of warm summer days.

The third stanza concludes by returning to the anxiety that readers and writers feel when confronted by the shifting meaning of language. The sheer joy of "open-ended" play disappears under the desire to nail down specific meanings. "It gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters." In the final stanza, Ashbery reflects on having just completed the poem. The false promise of being able to communicate, of being able to say something on a plain level, teased him into writing this poem: "I think you exist only / To tease me into doing it, on your level, and then you aren't there / Or have adopted a different attitude." But as soon as he finishes the poem, he realizes that the plain level has again disappeared and the meaning of his words have already shifted. The final stanza then encourages the reader to reflect once more on the relationship between the poet, the reader, and the poem: "The poem is you." If the purpose of poetry is to communicate meaning and if words only have meaning in the act of being "played" or of being read, then how do we define a poem? Is a reader in the act of interpretation actually a part of the poem itself?

According to deconstruction, meaning cannot be proven or nailed down. It is something that is constantly in flux, constantly changing and shifting. This does not mean that Ashbery's poem is meaningless. Its meaning, however, does not take the form that many readers may be accustomed to searching for in a poem. Instead, the meaning of this poem lies in reflecting on the process of interpretation, in that shadowy ground between the reader and the words themselves. What Ashbery's poem does is to force the reader to ask questions about reading, to raise issues about writing, and to think about the purpose and function of poetry.

Source: John Pipkin, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

The State University of New York at Buffalo's Electronic Poetry Center has a website dedicated to Ashbery's life and work at http://wings. buffalo.edu/epc/authors/ashbery/

The Academy of American Poets has a site dedicated to Ashbery and an audiofile of the poet reading his poem "My Philosophy of Life" at http://www.poets.org/lit/poet/jashbfst.htm

A collection of critical, historical, and biographical information on Ashbery can be accessed at the Modern American Poetry site at http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/ ashbery/ashbery.htm

The Academy of American Poets offers a 1994 audiocassette of Ashbery reading from his seventeenth collection of poetry, *Can You Hear, Bird.*

Topics for Further Study

Do you agree with the speaker's claim that "This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level"? Why or why not?

Rewrite "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" using language that, to you, is on "a very plain level." Try to get at what you see as the meaning of the poem.

Write a poem that contains at least five allusions to popular culture.

Many modern and contemporary poets like Ashbery see poetry primarily as a form of play. After defining the term "play" to your satisfaction, discuss how you see "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" as an illustration (or not) of play.

Ashbery is frequently linked by personal history and aesthetic affinity to the abstract expressionists, a group of painters who were more interested in the process of creation than in the product itself. After researching abstract expressionism, write a short essay arguing for the ways in which Ashbery might be called an abstract expressionist poet.

Compare and Contrast

1981: International Business Machines introduces its personal computer for the home market, and in the first year and a half 136,000 are sold. Shortly after an entire industry of "PC clones" begins.

1997: Deep Blue, a 32-node IBM supercomputer, defeats World Chess champion Gary Kasparov.

1981: A number of near-miss nuclear accidents occur. The USS *George Washington,* a submarine carrying 160 nuclear warheads, collides with a Japanese freighter in the East China Sea, and an American *Posiedon* nuclear missile being removed from the USS *Holland* is caught by a safety mechanism just seconds before it would have hit the ship's hull.

1997: The United States breaks a five-year moratorium on nuclear testing and conducts an underground sub-critical nuclear weapons test at the Nevada Test Site.

1997: Alexander Lebed, Russian President Boris Yeltsin's former National Security Advisor, claims that 100 suitcase-sized nuclear bombs are missing in Russia.

1998: Both India and Pakistan conduct nuclear weapons tests. Tensions between the two countries run high.

2000: Officials announce that crucial data on United States' nuclear weapons is missing from a vault in Los Alamos, New Mexico.

What Do I Read Next?

"Paradoxes and Oxymorons" appears in Ashbery's 1981 collection *Shadow Train,* which collects fifty poems, each consisting of four quatrains.

In his interview with John Tranter in a 1986 issue of *Scripsi,* an Australian magazine, Ashbery discusses his own poetry and its relation to language.

Bob Perleman's 1996 book *The Marginalization of Poetry* discusses the politics of much contemporary experimental poetry, including Ashbery's.

Early criticism on Ashbery often labeled him a Language writer. Language writers is a name given to a group of like-minded writers, most of whom are from the West Coast and most of whom experiment with language and see poetry as a vehicle for criticism and theory as much as self-expression. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book,* edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein and published in 1984, collects essays from this group of writers.

A number of essays in the 1990 anthology *Poetry After Modernism* criticize Ashbery's poetry for its obscurity and abstraction. Robert Mc- Dowell edited the collection.

Further Study

Ashbery, John, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,* Viking Press, 1975.

Ashbery won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award for this book, which cemented his reputation as a leading American poet.

Glover, Michael, "A Blue Rinse for the Language," in *The Independent,* November 13, 1999.

This Michael Glover interview with Ashbery is refreshing and personal. Ashbery discusses critical reception of his poetry and expresses bemusement at how his life has turned out.

Kermani, David K., *John Ashbery: A Comprehensive Bibliography,* Garland Publishing, Inc. 1976.

This bibliography lists Ashbery's art criticism, catalogues, translations, and other miscellaneous writings, most of which have not yet made it into book form.

Lehman, David, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*, Anchor Books, 1999.

Ashbery is considered a poet from the "New York School" of poets, a loose group of writers including Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler. Lehman claims that the four constituted the last true avant-garde movement in American poetry.

McClatchey, J. D., ed., *Poets on Painters: Essays on the Art of Painting by Twentieth-Century Poets*, University of California Press, 1990.

Ashbery is an art critic as well as a poet. This collection presents reviews and essays by well-known poets on painters.

Shapiro, David, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry,* Columbia University Press, 1979.

Shapiro's book is one of the first full-length studies of Ashbery's work. It is quirky and at times difficult reading but well worth the effort.

Bibliography

Ashbery, John, "Capital Gains," in *New York,* September 3, 1979, p. 56.

------, *Selected Poems,* Penguin, 1985.

Fields, Kenneth, "More Than Language Means," in *Southern Review,* 1979, pp. 196-204.

Graff, Gerald, "Indeterminacy," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study,* edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Lehman, David, ed., *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery,* Cornell University Press, 1980.

------, ed., *John Ashbery,* Cornell University Press, 1979.

Perleman, Bob, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History*, Princeton University Press, 1996.

Richman, Robert, "Our 'Most Important' Living Poet," in *Commentary,* July 1982, pp. 62-8.

Schultz, Susan, *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry,* University of Alabama Press, 1995.

Shapiro, David, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry,* Columbia University Press, 1979.

Shetley, Vernon, "Language on a Very Plain Level," in *Poetry,* July 1982, pp. 236-41.

Shoptaw, John, Biographical entry on John Ashbery in *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies,* edited by Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991.

------, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry*, Harvard University Press, 1994.

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