Poetry Study Guide

Poetry by Marianne Moore

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Introduction

The poem "Poetry" was first published in a literary journal in 1919. Later, it was included in three of Moore's books: *Observations*, *Collected Poems*, and *Complete Poems*. The poem varies in length with each publication, changing from thirteen lines to almost forty lines, and then to three lines, respectively. In "Poetry," the speaker opens the poem by claiming that she "dislikes . . . all this fiddle"□ meaning poetry. In a tone that is both authoritative and witty, the speaker then goes on to develop her argument, carefully cataloging many of poetry's shortcomings. Occasionally, she illustrates her logic by using carefully chosen images. The speaker says that one of poetry's biggest flaws occurs when it lacks genuineness. She insists that poetry should combine both imagination and reality. She illustrates this point by saying that true poetry is able to present "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." This metaphor has become one of the most widely cited metaphors for poetry. Ironically, through the speaker's exploration of what is "derivative" and "unintelligible" in poetry, this poem proves the merits of poetry. It offers the very model of what "genuine" poetry is, and it exemplifies how valuable good poetry can be.

Author Biography

Marianne Moore was born to John Milton Moore and Mary Warner Moore on November 15, 1887, in Kirkwood, Missouri. Moore never knew her father, who had been committed to an asylum some months before her birth; she lived near St. Louis with her mother, brother, and grandfather until the age of seven. The family then moved to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where her mother taught English at the Metzger Institute for Girls. Moore attended Metzger Institute as a girl, later attending Bryn Mawr College, where she took a bachelor's degree in biology and histology in 1909.

Moore's early poetry was published in the literary magazine of Bryn Mawr College. She also first became aware of new trends in the arts through the influence of Goddard King, a Bryn Mawr lecturer in comparative literature and art history who was among the early champions of Picasso and other modern European painters. After graduating from Bryn Mawr in 1909, Moore completed a business course at Carlisle Commercial College before taking a European vacation with her mother, visiting France and England. When she returned to the United States, Moore began a career as a teacher of English and business subjects at the United States Industrial Indian School in her hometown of Carlisle.

Although she had published a few poems in college publications, Moore first caught the attention of a wider audience in 1915, when several of her poems appeared in such prominent literary magazines of the time as the *Egoist*. Moore moved to Chatham, New Jersey, in 1916, when her brother Warner Moore, recently ordained a Presbyterian minister and appointed to a church there, invited her and her mother to join him. In 1918, the two women moved to a basement apartment in Greenwich Village, and Moore found work as a secretary and a girls' school tutor. She later became an assistant at the Hudson Park branch of the New York Public Library.

During the early 1920s, Moore published her first three collections of poems. In 1924, she received an award of $2,000 from the Dial Press for her contributions to literature, an award that raised some controversy in literary circles. In 1925, Moore became editor of *The Dial*, a position that brought her into contact with many of the noted literary and artistic figures of the time, including T. S. Eliot, Conrad Aiken, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, and Malcolm Cowley. When the magazine ceased publication in 1929, Moore was well enough established that she was able to support herself and her mother by writing essays and reviews for magazines. The two women moved to Brooklyn in 1929 to be near Moore's brother, who was now in the Navy and stationed at the Brooklyn Naval Yard. Moore was to live in Brooklyn until 1966 when the neighborhood finally became too unsafe and she returned to Manhattan. Except for brief teaching assignments at the Cummington School in Massachusetts in 1941 and at Bryn Mawr in 1953, Moore earned her living as a freelance writer until her death in 1972.

's literary contributions were recognized with a host of awards and honors, including the Poetry Society of America's Gold Medal for Distinguished Development, the National Medal for Literature, and an honorary doctorate from Harvard University. Today, such

noted poets and commentators as Grace Schulman and Tess Gallagher continue to praise Moore's verse, hailing the poet as one of the most important in modern literature.

Plot Summary

Line 1

The poem begins with its speaker making a rather ironic statement about her distaste for poetry. The statement is contradictory because, while she does not prefer poetry, the speaker nevertheless expresses herself through the medium of a poem. The reason the speaker dislikes poetry may be inferred from the use of the word "fiddle." Apparently the speaker believes that poetry can be trifling, or that the poetry-writing process involves too much petty tampering. The speaker's conversational opening of the poem allows for a tone that seems casual, yet it is one that is marked by a witty intelligence.

Lines 2-3

These lines contain a statement that argues with the one given in line 1 and line 2. Here the speaker admits that although one may think oneself perfectly justified in despising the triviality of poetry, through poetry one also might find that which is real and honest. The beginning lines of the poem thus establish the dialectic that will be elaborated upon in the rest of the poem.

Lines 4-7

In these lines, the speaker gives specific examples of things that are "genuine," and then she explains exactly how and why those things strike her as being original and sincere. The syntax of this sentence places the images of grasping hands, dilating eyes, and rising hair as close as possible to the word "genuine" from the previous sentence. Because Moore claims to have hated "connectives," she relies on this syntactical proximity to imply a connection. Having made that connection, the sentence then progresses the logic of the argument. It states that functioning hands and eyes and hair are significant not because critics can deduct lofty conclusions about them but because they each serve a distinct purpose. The poem may be suggesting that, in good poetry, every detail must be functional rather than merely academic or ornamental.

Lines 8-11

The pronoun "they" in line 8 refers, in part, to the hands, eyes, and hair mentioned in line 4. On another level, the pronoun "they" also refers to any significant objects included in any poem. This section echoes the earlier suggestion that every detail within a poem should serve a purpose. These lines imply that if the meaning of an object within a poem is so obscure that it cannot be understood, then the poem will be confusing to its reader. The reader will not appreciate what she or he does not comprehend. Another possible interpretation of lines 8-11 is as a warning against the use of enigmatic symbolism in poetry.

Lines 12-19

These lines offer a catalog of the different types of "important phenomena" that are sometimes included in poetry but whose meanings are not necessarily understood as they should be. Moore frequently uses animals in her poetry to draw a connection between art and the natural world. Here, she provides images of a sleeping bat, "elephants pushing," "a wild horse taking a roll," and "a tireless wolf under / a tree." The poem offers these creatures as examples of a kind of genuineness that is often misrepresented and misunderstood in poetry. However, the poem does not "discriminate" against the human kingdom, either: these lines acknowledge that poetry often concerns itself with the significant "phenomena" of the critic, the statistician, the baseball fan, business documents, and schoolbooks. Line 18 acknowledges that all such considerations are, indeed, significant.

The speaker's tone becomes cautioning, even didactic, as she again qualifies one of her previous statements. Although she says in line 18 that the "phenomena" she mentions are important, she now warns against the use of such phenomena by "half poets." The phrase "dragged into prominence" shows that the speaker believes that some poets force emphasis upon certain details within their poems. The speaker seems to think that certain subjects in poems are exploited, and when they are, "the result is / not poetry." These lines serve to remind poets and readers alike of the dangers of superficiality in poetry.

Lines 20-24

Here, the speaker urges poets to strive to be "'literalists of / the imagination.'" This phrase is a quote taken from W. B. Yeats. Moore often includes quotes from other literature within her own work as a way of responding to the ideas of other writers. In doing this, she demonstrates her belief that the ideas presented in literature should be so important as to be open to lively, ongoing response. Apparently, Moore believes that good writing integrates other literature.

The phrase "'literalists of / the imagination'" contains a paradox. This phrase calls upon poets to be literalists, which means that they ought to present what they imagine word for word, without embellishment, and in such a way as to adhere to reality. Of course, such a task is nearly impossible when one is presenting that which is a product of the imagination. If something is imagined, then, by definition, it has no reality, no actuality. Undoubtedly, Moore recognizes the contradiction of this paradox. Perhaps she includes it here as a way of acknowledging the near impossibility poets face in using words to reconcile that which is imagined with that which is actual. Nevertheless, the paradox seems to serve as the ultimate standard toward which poets ought to strive in their representation of what is "genuine."

Lines 22-24 then describe literalist poets as those that rise above arrogance and pettines, avoiding the tendency of half-poets, defined in line 19, to force pointless

emphasis on an unnecessary subject. The word "triviality" echoes the word "fiddle" from line 2 and repeats the suggestion that sometimes poetry is not as vital as it could be.

The phrase "'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'" is a paradox that provides a visual complement to the paradox given in line 21 and line 22. (Although this paradox also is surrounded by quotations marks, its original source has never been found; therefore, it is generally attributed to Moore.) Through the example of real toads in imaginary gardens, the speaker shows the reader what she means by saying that poets must be "'literalists of the imagination.'" Here, the poem suggests that good poetry is the "imaginary garden" in which "real toads"□or anything that is genuine□may reside. The speaker implies that only when a poet uses imagination to present reality in an honest way is a poem created.

Lines 25-29

These lines repeat the notion that poetry is created from a combination of imagination ("raw materials") and reality ("that which is on the other hand / genuine"). The word "demand" indicates that the speaker thinks one must hold poetry to high standards. Although she acknowledges that much poetry does not yet meet these high expectations, the speaker admits that, in the meantime, it is still possible for one to be "interested" in poetry. The poem concludes with this resolution of the dialectic that was established in the poem's opening lines.

Themes

Nature

Nature was a popular subject for romantic poets who found in it their inspiration, energy, and, often, their reason for being. Modernist poets enlarged their conception of subject matter and of nature itself. Moore, even though she described the natural world with an almost scientific eye for detail, using decidedly unromantic language, nonetheless considered it a place of beauty and mystery. She underscores this attitude in the third stanza when she uses the odd behavior of animals as examples of what the human mind "cannot understand." But like poetry, these behaviors should be embraced rather than ignored, as they embody the very "raw material" of life itself, which cannot be reduced to mean this or that, as critics would have it.

Modernism

Modern poetry has often been criticized for its obscurity and elitism, with some writers claiming that it shows a deliberate attempt to alienate general readers. Moore addresses this in her opening line when she claims about poetry: "I, too, dislike it." What she implies here is that she dislikes the popular conception of modern poetry as writing that has nothing to do with the real world, and is often abstract. However, in the rest of her poem she utilizes explicitly modernist techniques, such as irony, allusion, paradox, quoting others, and incorporating footnotes□techniques that often invite the very accusation of elitism. In this way, she shows herself to be a true modernist, interested in process as much as product and embracing contradiction and abstraction while appearing to endorse unequivocal statements about the real world.

Imagination

Poets have paid homage to the idea of the imagination ever since romantics such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth championed its powers, naming it as a crucial part in the poetic process. Coleridge, for example, distinguished between imagination and "fancy," terms that previously had been used synonymously, by giving imagination a more important role. Whereas fancy merely reassembles sense impressions, the imagination synthesizes disparate impressions, ideas, etc. into a unified whole, a whole greater than its parts. Moore's "Poetry" endorses this view as well, although she claims the imagination can only be effective if applied to stuff of the real world, that is, the "genuine." This is one reason why Moore attacks critics, as they are champions of "understanding" more interested in analyzing than reseeing the world and accepting its contradictions and mysteries, which are indicative of the reality and of poetry itself.

Poetry

Categorizing writing into genres such as poetry, fiction, drama, non-fiction, and the like is often a vexing matter not only for bookstores and marketers but for poets and critics as well. Moore was particularly notorious for her ambivalence about labeling what she did, noting once that her writing is called poetry only because no one else knew what to call it. "Poetry" is ironic partly because of its name and the fact that its argument about poetry's definition is never resolved. Moore's writing resembles poetry the most in its physical appearance, as she makes innovative use of line breaks and indentation. However, her choppy rhythms, use of multi-claused sentences, quotations, and footnotes all give her writing the appearance of prose. Partly, this approach to poetry stems from Moore's affinity with the Imagist movement, members of which argued that, to rejuvenate poetry, meter should be replaced by the rhythms of colloquial speech and conventionally poetic diction should be replaced by contemporary language and phrasing.

Style

"Poetry" is constructed in syllabic verse, which is a sub-category of free verse. Free verse means that the poem does not follow a regular pattern of rhyme and meter. Meter refers to units of stressed and unstressed syllables. Instead, the poem loosely relies on "syllabics," which refers to the number of syllables per line. In syllabic verse, the number of syllables in any given line in a stanza is the same as the number of syllables of the same given line in the other stanzas. For example, you will notice that the final lines of each stanza in "Poetry" all contain thirteen syllables. Although Moore varies her syllabics, if one counts the syllables throughout the poem, one will notice a rough pattern emerging. By relying on syllabics instead of rhythm and meter, Moore is able to create a poem that more closely follows the patterns of natural speech.

Moore varies the typography of this poem. "Typography" refers to the way in which the poem is typed on the page. Moore often uses equal indentation to signify lines that rhyme. For example, the final words in line 4 and line 5 both rhyme ("eyes" and "rise"), and both lines are indented the same amount of spaces. The same may be said of line 27 and line 28 ("and" and "hand"). Not all of Moore's rhymes appear at the end of the lines, nor are they necessarily true rhymes. Rather, some are slant rhymes, also known as off rhymes, which means that they are close in sound, but do not exactly rhyme. An example of an off rhyme is the "baseball fan" and the "statistician" in line 15. Rather than overwhelming her reader with blatant rhymes, Moore mutes them so that her reader may experience the pleasure of hearing similar sounds in the way they subtly occur in natural speech.

Historical Context

In 1919, when the first version of "Poetry" was published in the journal *Others*, people were still figuratively□and some literally□shell-shocked from World War I, which ended the preceding year. In literature, poets and novelists experimented with form and subject matter, trying to craft work that embodied the uncertainty, fear, and anxiety that consumed people. T. S. Eliot's poems in his collections *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), *Poems* (1920), and *The Wasteland* (1922) accomplished this through use of fragmentation, allusion, irony, myth, and symbolism. Ezra Pound, an important influence on many modernist poets, exhorted poets to "make it new" and claimed the image as the cornerstone of his poetics. In addition to publishing and translating works such as *The Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti* (1912), *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* (1920), and *Personae* (1926), Pound mentored numerous writers including Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and James Joyce, and supported new literary magazines including *Poetry* and *The Little Review*. In his poem "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly," Pound called the carnage of World War I "wastage as never before" and described the "disillusions as never told in the old days." Moore, who corresponded with Pound, Eliot, Williams, Wallace Stevens, and a host of other influential poets, eschewed emotionalism in her writing and embraced a poetry that attempted to describe the physical world with precise and detailed images, often couched in argument. She also borrowed from other texts, sprinkling her verse liberally with quotations. Moore developed her reputation as both poet and critic largely through publishing in smaller, newer journals such as *Poetry*, established in 1912, *The Egoist*, a magazine of imagist verse, and *Others*, and as an editor of *The Dial*, a prestigious literary journal of the 1920s.

Moore's concern for the "genuine" in poetry is also a concern that early twentieth-century painters held. However, their approach towards subject matter was less concrete than Moore's, and instead of precision in representation, they experimented with abstract depictions of ideas and things. Cubists such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque broke down their subject matter, analyzed it, and then reconstructed it in abstract form. Picasso's painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, considered by many to be the first Cubist painting, depicted five nude women in an angular and distorted way, destroying the continuity of the human body and creating an almost three-dimensional effect. A raft of other art movements including surrealism, futurism, imagism, and dadaism sought during this time to provoke viewers and readers to see and experience the world anew. In addition to the war, events such as Albert Einstein's publication of the theory of relativity, the popularization of the automobile and the radio, Daylight Savings Time in America, and the women's vote contributed to reconfiguring the ways in which people thought about and perceived their world and one another.

After the war, many American writers fled to Europe, where it was possible to live well inexpensively. Seeking new ideas and to revive their flagging spirits, writers such as Malcolm Cowley, Ezra Pound, Archibald MacLeish, and Ernest Hemingway moved to France, Spain, and Italy. Many of these expatriates gathered around Gertrude Stein, a wealthy American art collector and writer who sponsored "salons" at her apartment at

27, rue de Fleurus in Paris, that attracted artists, writers, and musicians like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Virgil Thompson, and scores of others who helped to create and define the modernist tradition. Noting their restlessness and the fact that many of the American writers who gathered around her during this time were morally and spiritually adrift, Stein referred to the group as "a lost generation." Though she had traveled to Europe before the war, Moore stayed in the States during and after it, living with her mother in Manhattan.

Critical Overview

Because many of Moore's poems rely upon the careful presentation of visual imagery to convey intellectual and emotional ideas, she is sometimes linked to the imagists, a school of writers popular in the 1920s. On the other hand, her poetry also demonstrates an experimental arrangement on the page, a preoccupation with science and technology, a certain intellectualism, and the kind of emotional distance that is often found in modernist poetry. Still others claim Moore's writing is so unique that it does not fit into any one particular school of poetry. In any case, almost all critics would agree with the following conviction asserted by T. S. Eliot in an introduction to Moore's *Selected Poems*: "Miss Moore's poems form part of the small body of durable poetry written in our time . . . in which an original sensibility and alert intelligence and deep feeling have been engaged in maintaining the life of the English language."

Although "Poetry" was written early in Moore's career, it generally is regarded as one of Moore's most accomplished poems. In the poem, the speaker expresses a "dislike" for poetry, arguing that it often lacks "that which is . . . genuine." Through her argument, the speaker ends up exemplifying all that is valuable about poetry. As Sven Birkerts says in *The Electric Life: Essays on Modern Poetry*, "The poem is, in fact, a kind of anthology of the attributes and techniques that readers have most cherished in Moore." One of those cherished techniques is the use of paradox, particularly the paradox that the speaker supplies when she says poems should be like "'imaginary gardens with real toads in them.'" In his book *Marianne Moore*, Bernard F. Engel praises Moore's use of this paradox. He says,

> Fascination with paradox is the most immediately striking aspect of the verse of Moore. This interest in the seemingly contradictory is often witty and, at times, playful. . . . But it is also profound. Paradox is of the essence of her work because she wishes to advocate a set of values.

Paradox is only one aspect of Moore's poems that make them valuable to their readers. As poet James Dickey writes in *Babel to Byzantium*, "Every poem of hers lifts us toward our own discoveryprone lives. It does not state, in effect, that I am more intelligent than you, more creative because I found this item and used it and you didn't. It seems to say, rather, that I found this, and what did you find? Or better, what *can* you find."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of literature and composition. In this essay, Semansky considers the question of definition in Moore's poem. Coming up with an adequate definition of the term "poetry" has obsessed critics, poets, and philosophers since Plato, who wanted to banish them for misrepresenting the truth. Some link the term to formal features of writing, while others focus on the composing process or the attitude or qualities of the writer. Some believe that poetry does not necessarily even have to use words, but rather is a matter of perception. Moore's poem tackles the "problem" of defining poetry by creating a hierarchy of degree separating "genuine" poetry from bad poetry, and by linking "genuine" poetry to a specific purpose.

By titling her poem "Poetry," Moore creates expectations that the ensuing lines will describe or explain the phenomenon. However, her first line disarms readers when she claims, "I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle." In *Marianne Moore: The Cage and the Animal*, Donald Hall writes that the "fiddle" Moore refers to is "a kind of poetry that is neither honest nor sincere but that has found fashionable approval by virtue of its very obscurity." The "things that are important beyond all this fiddle" are obviously related to "hands that can grasp, eyes / that can dilate, hair that can rise," which, Moore tells readers, are "useful." But how are they useful, and what do they have to do with poetry?

They are useful in that they are fodder for the imagination. They are the stuff of the real, physical, concrete world. Moore represents the world of the senses in her list of images and underscores two things: the importance of concrete imagery in poetry, and the appropriate use of these images by the imagination. These criteria have been staple features in definitions of good poetry since the romantics. Moore also makes a dig at critics in her claim that these things are important "not because a / high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them." Rather, their mere existence is reason enough for their importance, for they give human beings themselves definition.

Moore further differentiates between "fiddle" and the "genuine" in the second stanza, saying that the former is derivative, while the latter is what poetry should be all about. Moore critic Elizabeth Joyce writes that genuine poetry for Moore is about the here and now, and that "its reason for existence is entrenched in its ability to capture a sincere response to life's experiences, those that accurately reflect the social context of the poet." Of course, one person's idea of accuracy is another person's idea of sloppy thinking, and sincerity itself has become a suspect term for much of modern poetry. Moore's genius is that by implicitly espousing such a modest purpose for poetry she stands to gain more readers, as she acknowledges poetry's diminished status in modern society while also attempting to salvage a place for it. She wants to give meaning back to poetry, to rescue it from the posers, but the more she elaborates her desire the more muddied her ideas become.

The third stanza provides the very element that Moore claims makes up genuine poetry: the use of concrete images in the service of the imagination. Animal behavior that

appears incomprehensible to human beings is like poetry in that people attempt to explain it, though it appears unfathomable. She slips in yet another dig at critics by including them in the list of odd animal facts: "the immovable critic twitching his skin / like a horse that feels a flea." All of these descriptions, however mundane, contribute to the variety of the natural and the human world and present readers with material things in a new way. Joyce elaborates on the connection between these items and abstract poetry itself:

> Even though abstract poetry is obscure, Moore poses,
> it is worth our attention because it is no more difficult
> to understand than anything else around us: it
> remains a reflection of the changes in our culture.

The notion of abstraction is especially important for modern poetry, and for Moore's own writing, which, like T. S. Eliot's and Wallace Stevens's, is dense with allusions and requires readers to be active participants in the meaning-making process. In this sense, the poem is validation, justification, and an example of the very ideas it espouses. Unlike concrete images, which provide a mental picture of the material world and evoke its sensuous qualities, abstractions denote qualities or attributes of things and are based in the world of ideas. In the early part of the twentieth century when Moore wrote this poem, abstraction was becoming more and more fashionable in the arts and in poetry. In painting, artists such as Pablo Picasso and Wassily Kandinsky composed wholly abstract paintings based upon ideas and theories rather than what they saw with their eyes, and in theater dramatists such as Eugene O'Neill and Frank Wedekind wrote plays that featured representative types rather than particular people with distinct personalities.

The genuine, for Moore, then, did not mean *just* the real or the original, at least not in any surface- level way. The writing of others was as important to her own work as her perceptions of worldy things. This is evident in her allusions to Leo Tolstoy and William Butler Yeats to make her argument. Tolstoy struggled to say where poetry ended and prose began, and Yeats argued that William Blake was a "literalist of the imagination" in his belief that figures conjured by the imagination had real observable properties. Moore's poem, then, an example itself of the genuine, achieves its effects not only through its concrete and detailed imagery but also by referring readers to other writers. In this way, she draws on tradition while simultaneously helping to reshape it. Quoting and alluding to other writing is a key feature of intertextuality, the notion that all texts are related and ultimately depend upon one another for their meaning. In *Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions*, Bonnie Costello argues that Moore's strategy in quoting others is part of her broader strategy of evasion, of scrupulously examining something□an object, an animal, an idea□but never defining it precisely, a strategy seemingly at odds with her own reputation for precision and accuracy. Costello writes that in "Poetry," Moore

> posits an ideal in which the genuine is absorbed into
> form, reference into poem, the real into the imaginary.
> In the meantime poetry turns out to be a magic

trick that does not quite succeed, but which absorbs us in its dazzling sleight-of-hand, in which we think we glimpse the genuine before it turns into the poet once again.

For Costello, then, Moore is an illusionist, which means that Costello, as critic, is the one who "unmasks" her tricks. This is an intriguing reading of the poem, given Moore's own description of critics in this poem and others. It is interesting that Moore revised "Poetry" a number of times, and that her last revision, published in her *Complete Poems* (1967) consisted of just three lines, thereby giving critics paradoxically both more *and* less to work with. It is more because critics can now focus on Moore's practice of revision and the evolution of her thinking about poetry, and it is less because three lines is fewer than twenty-nine.

Critics have paid more attention to her numerous revisions of the poem than the poem itself. Bonnie Honigsblum, for example, in "Marianne Moore's Revisions of 'Poetry,'" argues that Moore revised her poem through the years because she was influenced by other writers, and that Moore's idea of the possibility of poetry itself evolved. Focusing on Moore's notes to the poem, what literary theorists sometime refer to as its "paratextuality," Honigsblum claims that what Moore left out in terms of explanatory notes, rather than what she included, tells readers more about her reasons for revision than the revisions themselves. It is in this extra-literary material that researchers have looked for clues to Moore's intentions and meanings. This is fitting, considering that Moore considered her writing part of the world-as-text around her, instead of merely an expression of individual genius, as other poets might claim. The clearest expression of what she meant by the "genuine" in poetry is best summed up by her own words, written in a letter to a college student (reprinted in *The Marianne Moore Newsletter*), Thomas P. Murphy, who had asked her what she meant by the term.

I meant by the genuine, a core of value□expressed in whatever way the writer can best express it. Like you, I prefer rhyme to free verse; I like a tune and I feel that one should be as clear as one's natural reticence allows one to be. The maximum efficiency of expression in poetry should be at least as great as it could be in prose; certainly, one should be natural. The reversed order of words seems to me poetic suicide.`

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Poetry," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Engle writes about Moore's treatment of the subject of poetry in her poems.

It is a truism that all poems are "about" poetry. At least the next nine pieces in *Complete Poems* are more or less direct treatments of poetry itself and of the poet and his critics. In "Poetry" Moore stated something of her own artistic creed; in "Pedantic Literalist," "Critics and Connoisseurs," and "The Monkeys," she commented upon criticism; in "In the Days of Prismatic Color," "Peter," "Picking and Choosing," "England," and "When I Buy Pictures," she presented particular aspects of her aesthetics.

In its complete form "Poetry" contains Moore's most comprehensive reflections on her art. Since she customarily made decisions for artistic reasons, it is most likely that she became dissatisfied with the poem's views or with the way it expresses them. It is also possible that she was tired of the endless rehashing of the poem by critics. Whatever her motive, in her last revision she retained only two and a half of the first three lines of the 1951 version. The resulting fragment amounts to an abstract summary of her position, lacking the detail that made the position vividly comprehensible. The editors of the 1981 collection complied with her wishes by publishing the abbreviated version in the text; fortunately, in the view of most readers, they gave the full version in the notes. I will discuss this version. The beginning assertion that "I, too, dislike it" is sometimes quoted as evidence that Moore was a good sophisticate who did not take her art seriously, that under the skin she was essentially a middle-class intellectual without unmodish convictions. But to so read her is to read quite wrongly. Though the remark is on the face of it ironic, it is more than a simple comment of obvious indirection. She was declaring her disgust with the common view of poetry as a way of prettifying standard opinions, usually those of intellectual liberalism. The critics who read her as having contempt for all poetry are thus hoisted on their own petard: the kind of poetry she disliked is, or includes, that which they commonly prefer. What she liked is "the genuine"; the rest of "Poetry" is an effort at explanation of this quality.

Her speaker declares, in lines reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," that vivid presentation of the specific details of a subject is important not because it may lead to "high-sounding interpretation" but because it is "useful": because it can lead to the "genuine." But if these details are only "derivative," removed from the actuality of the experience, none of us will admire them. The "us" is delightfully and pointedly represented as creatures engaged in a variety of activities; the passage deftly scores the "immovable critic" as a horse to whom the work of art is a flea. No one, the poem is saying, is likely to be diverted from his usual concerns by anything other than the accurately presented. All the "us" are possible subjects; even the business and schoolroom documents sometimes excluded from the canon of literary material may be used for poetry.

Yet, as these inclusions would indicate, the mere thing in itself is not a poem: "half poets" who celebrate the humdrum detail for its own sake do not thereby make poetry.

What is important is that the poet be true ultimately, not to fact but to his imagination; poets must be "literalists of the imagination," above the insolence of expecting presentation of the trivial to be poetry. The poet must give "'imaginary gardens with real toads in them"'□a populace of real objects that, taken together, will produce an imagined experience. Perhaps no one at present has achieved such art; meanwhile, one may qualify as being "interested in poetry" if he demands fulfillment of the objectivist paradox that "rawness," the accurate presentation of the thing itself, must be the basis for, the material of, a "genuine" garden that is more than the sum of its physical components.

This theory is, of course, ultimately a neoromantic one; for it requires something more than realism of observation. It does insist, however, that one start from the accurately realized object. In Moore's creed, poetry must climb to heights beyond realism, but it must begin its ascent on a stairway of fact. The enameled kylin of "Nine Nectarines" was a better object of art than the painted fruit, though delineated with perhaps equal inaccuracy because his creator perceived the spirit within him.

In rhetorical form "Poetry" follows one of Moore's common patterns; moving from an artfully casual beginning to a climax of feeling in the nextto- last stanza, it then ends almost off-handedly with a final, fairly direct comment upon what has been presented. As a work of art, it is its own exemplification. Though it deals more directly with an abstract subject than most of her work, it is grounded on a sufficient quota of such specificities as "hair that can rise," a bat upside down, a "wild horse taking a roll." Because it is provided with these concrete details, it is much more successful than "In This Age of Hard Trying, Nonchalance□" in which the subject is equally abstract but the incident the poem is based upon is not clearly delineated.

Each of the remaining eight poems on poetry works through a particular object or set of circumstances. The injunction in "Poetry" that one must be a "literalist of the imagination" does not, of course, mean approval of the "Pedantic Literalist" who is disparaged in the poem of this title. The chief error of the mundanely minded is illustrated as deceptiveness: his failure to perform what he seems to promise. Such a literalist is termed in the opening line a "Prince Rupert's drop" (a blob of glass so treated that it appears attractive but flies apart when handled) and a "paper muslin ghost," a spurious spirit that would crumple if embraced. A further comparison is to a heart that, failing to give warning of its weakness, caused its owner's death. The result of long practice at deception□perhaps of trying vainly and unimaginatively to make poetry out of the merely literal□is that the spontaneity with which even the "literalist" is born turns into wood.

The "hardihood" that resists spontaneities is the topic of "Critics and Connoisseurs," a poem opening with the somewhat resounding remark that there is "a great amount of poetry in unconscious/ fastidiousness." Certain "products" of conscious fastidiousness are "well enough in their way," the poem continues, but such spontaneous attempts at careful procedure as a child's efforts to right a toy and to feed a puppy are better acts of art because they are unforced. Another example of overdone fastidiousness is a swan remembered as reluctant to give up its "disbelief," its false dignity, in order to eat food

thrown to it. In the third stanza the poem turns to "you," the critics and connoisseurs who, like the swan, have "ambition without understanding." An illustration of the fault is furnished by the behavior of an ant that foolishly continued attempts to find a use for burdens that could contribute nothing to ant goals. The poem ends with an inquiry: of what use are such ambitions as those of the swan and the ant, ambitions to maintain an impenetrable reserve or to demonstrate that one has struggled for a useless trophy? Remembering the comment in "Poetry" that objects are good if in some sense useful, we may deduce that critics, like the swan, and connoisseurs, like the ant, are guilty of adopting attitudes and of choosing goals that could be valuable if intended to serve some useful purpose but are often clung to without understanding. The poem is recommending more attention to the spirit, less to the letter.

"The Monkeys" makes it clear that, though the artist is to find a "spirit" in the object his enterprise is not to be an expedition into the "arcanic." The poem, which begins with comments upon sights observed during a long-past trip to a menagerie (or a parliament of literary critics?) remarks on the difficulty of recalling in detail the reasons for the impression of "magnificence" that remains. But one creature will not be forgotten, a large, kingly cat who perhaps represents those described at the end of "Poetry" as "interested in poetry." He, it seems, gave the indignant speech of the last two stanzas of "The Monkeys," a protest against critics' imposition of "inarticulate frenzy" and their insistence on almost "malignant" depths in poetry. Moore, an impressionist in her own criticism, was again arguing for the spontaneous rather than the codified and pseudo-profound that she apparently believed typical of the "immovable" critic of "Poetry," the "consciously fastidious" interpreter of "Critics and Connoisseurs."

The ease with which she had a cat deliver a comment, almost a diatribe, on literary criticism demonstrates the art in the seemingly casual beginning and an ending that give a rightness to the choice of a feline spokesman. Having an animal convey the message provides a neat irony; the poem's original title, "My Apish Cousins," made somewhat more obvious the ironic comparison of human and animal.

(The unimaginative literalist was again a target in "Melanchthon," a work printed in 1951 but omitted from the 1981 book. It closes with a question that amounts to an assertion of the belief that the depth of a life and of a poet's work will not be perceived by one who fails to sense the "unreason" or mystery that Moore believed to lie behind all experience.)

Yet though the poet is not be "consciously fastidious" and is to see an "unreason," he is nevertheless to be clear. "In the Days of Prismatic Colour" declares that early in creation color was "fine" or exact, not because of art but because of its closeness to its origins. Even "obliqueness," indirection, was apparent and understandable, not hidden. But now the oblique is no longer accessible, and color no longer holds its purity; original simplicity has been replaced by "complexity." Though there is nothing wrong with complexity when it reflects actual perception, it is wrong when indulged in to the point that it obscures. And it is especially wrong when made an end in itself, when a poet values the vehemence instead of the worth of what he is saying, and insists that all truth

must be dark. Such insistence, being "principally throat," is a "sophistication" that is the direct opposite to truth.

Sophisticates, it appears, view the truth as something like a monster of Greek myth, crawling, gurgling, and darksome. "To what purpose!," she exclaims, are the perverse misunderstandings that see truth as complex and even as monstrous. Truth is "no Apollo / Belvedere, no formal thing": it is, we gather, spontaneous and unconscious. Though complexity may appear in it, not this but courage and endurance are its chief characteristics. The "wave" of critical fashion, of philosophical challenge, may roll over it; but, like the cliff in "The Fish," it will survive.

The virtue of being "natural," of doing without pretense or alibi what one is designed to do, is celebrated with appropriate playfulness in "Peter," a presentation of a cat belonging to two of Moore's women friends and a demonstration of her ability to exemplify in a poem the virtues she was meditating upon in the process of writing it. The observations of Peter that she sets down are those identified with what might be called his cat-ness: complete relaxation, narrowed eyes, obvious nightmares, and lack of concern with judgment that would condemn him for possessing the claws and tail he was born with. Emphasis is upon his animality, his unself-conscious turning from the coddled to the clawing and back again. The poem has been read as an attack on Catholicism, the cat representing the church that claims to have been founded by the apostle Peter and that to some Protestants has appeared as both lethargic and rapacious. The poem has even been read as a feminis attack on Catholicism's failure to ordain women. But it takes a considerable stretch to read into the piece an attack on another Christian church: the focus is on the cat in his cat-ness, not on use of him as a symbol, and when the poem appeared in 1924 neither Moore's own Presbyterian church nor other mainline denominations were ordaining women. Remaining unabashed by the "published fact"□his obvious animality□and willing "to purloin, to pursue" as instinct bids him, Peter the cat is a living example of natural behavior.

That naturalness is essential for the literary critic, who should see literature as "a phase of life," is the assertion of "Picking and Choosing." The advice is, as in "In the Days of Prismatic Colour," that we should not approach literature with fearful reverence. And, as in the passage in "Poetry" dismissing "half poets," we must not come to it as though it were merely commonplace. In his statement the critic must use the "true" word, avoiding the murky and the faked. As examples of the kind of "fact" that critcs should give, the speaker presents capsule comments on Shaw and Henry James that mention flaws in their work but also point to virtues. (The comment on James has changed several times. The first version said flatly that James "is not profound"; later versions say that James is all that he is said to be "if feeling is profound"; the 1981 book reads "James / is all that has been said of him".)

Moore concludes the passage with lines observing that Thomas Hardy, for example, should be seen not primarily as either novelist or poet but as a writer conforming to a dictum like T. S. Eliot's assertion that one should interpret life through "the medium of the emotions." "The Monkeys" shows Moore's own preference for criticism that has an emotional basis and her scorn for merely intellectual methods. She did in "Picking and

Choosing" concede that, if the critic must have an opinion, he may be permitted to "know what he likes." The next lines admit Gordon Craig and Kenneth Burke to the rank of good critic, both apparently having impressed Moore as knowing what they like.

Thought of Burke brings up the phrase *summa diligentia*, which Moore translated (in the essay "Humility, Concentration, and Gusto") as "with all speed." These words remind the speaker of the schoolboy mistranslation of the Latin as meaning "on top of the diligence," an example of one kind of bad literary criticism. In a tone of reasonableness the poem then comments that "We are not daft about the meaning but that the "familiarity" critics exhibit with "wrong meanings" is puzzling. The next several lines address those who exhibit such familiarity, adjuring them that, for example, the simple candle should not be seen as an electrified mechanism.

The last six lines ostensibly are addressed to a dog yapping to the world at large his daydream that he has caught a badger. He is told that he should remember that, even if he had really accomplished the feat, he would scarcely need to make such a clamor about it. The moral is that the critic should give hints, a few spontaneous reactions, not mystification and not boasts of imagined retrievals. The poet is recommending the process named in her title: the "picking and choosing" that she considered to be primarily a task for the emotions, not for powers of abstraction and analysis. We may note that Moore could be reasonably impersonal in her opinions of critics, for her work had been praised since the 1920s by Yvor Winters, R. P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, Eliot, Stevens, and Williams□a range including "new critics," impressionists, and eclectics.

Source: Bernard F. Engle, "The Armored Self: Selected Poems," in *Marianne Moore*, rev. ed., Twayne's United States Authors Series, Twayne, 1989.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Birkerts looks into the craft of Moore's poetry and the differences between her two versions of "Poetry."

Marianne Moore's decision to cut her wellknown anthology piece "Poetry" down to an unremarkable three-liner bearing the same title has baffled readers and critics alike. Such a histrionic, exhibitionistic gesture—like a woman taking scissors and roughly shearing off an admired head of hair. (No sexism intended here—I'm referring to a celluloid archetype.) Clearly it was an act of some kind of loathing, a deed perpetrated against the self. My guess is that Moore wished to inflict a symbolic injury upon a sensibility that could produce poetry only of a certain kind. Never mind that it was a poetry that had won for her a near-universal adulation. It was as if she knew in her heart wherein lay the real soul of poetry—in the *genuine*—and she knew that her own work could never get there. The disfiguring truncation of one of her best-loved poems was her way of incising the recognition directly into the body of that work.

From the *Selected Poems* of 1935, as preserved in *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, we can cull a rather interesting set of aesthetic statements:

"Taller by the length of
a conversation of five hundred years than all
the others," there was one, whose tales
of what could never have been actual—
were better than the haggish, uncompanionable
drawl
of certitude; his byplay
was more terrible in its effectiveness
than the fiercest frontal attack.
The staff, the bag, the feigned inconsequence
of manner, best bespeak that weapon, selfprotectiveness.
—from "In This Age of Hard Trying, Nonchalance
Is Good and"

Prince Rupert's drop, paper muslin ghost,
white torch—"with power to say unkind
things with kindness, and the most
irritating things in the midst of love and
tears," you invite destruction.
—from "Pedantic Literalist"

There is a great amount of poetry in unconcious
fastidiousness. Certain Ming
products, imperial floor-coverings of coach
wheel yellow, are well enough in their way but I
have seen

something

that I like better□a
mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly ballasted
animal stand up,
similar determination to make a pup
eat his meat from the plate.
□from "Critics and Connoisseurs"

complexity is not a crime, but carry
it to the point of murkiness
and nothing is plain. Complexity,
moreover, that has been committed to darkness, instead
of
granting itself to be the pestilence that it is, moves
all about
as if to bewilder us with the dismal
fallacy that insistence
is the measure of achievement and that all
truth must be dark. Principally throat, sophistication
is as it always
has been□at the antipodes from the
initial great truths.
□from "In the Days of Prismatic Color"

Small dog, going over the lawn nipping the linen
and saying
that you have a badger□remember Xenophon;
only rudimentary behavior is necessary to put us on
the scent.
"A right good salvo of barks," a few strong wrinkles
puckering
the skin between the ears, is all we ask.
□from "Picking and Choosing"

□a collection of little objects□
sapphires set with emeralds, and pearls with a
moonstone,
made fine
with enamel in gray, yellow, and dragon-fly blue;
a lemon, a pear
and three bunches of grapes tied with silver: your
dress a
magnificent square
cathedral tower of uniform
and at the same time diverse appearance□a

species of vertical vineyard rustling in the storm
of conventional opinion. Are they weapons or
scalpels?
Whetted to brilliance
by the hard majesty of that sophistication which is
superior to
opportunity,
these things are rich instruments with which to experiment.
But why dissect destiny with instruments
more highly specialized than components of
destiny itself?
□from "Those Various Scalpels"

Perceiving that in the masked ball
attitude, there is a hollowness
that beauty's light momentum can't redeem;
since disproportionate satisfaction anywhere
lacks a proportionate air,
he let us know without offense
by his hands' denunciatory
upheaval, that he despised the fashion
of curing us with an ape□making it his care
to smother us with fresh air.
□from "Nothing Will Cure the Sick Lion but to
Eat an Ape"

I could go on citing passages. Indeed, I could argue□some probably have□that the whole of Moore's *oeuvre* is an aesthetics, a careful establishing through example and commentary of both what is seemly for human conduct and what is essential for true artistic expression. It is the latter that interests me here, especially since Moore appears to propose values that are at odds with her own poetic performance.

"Are they weapons or scalpels?" she asks of the hypertrophied refinements of civilization. We may well ask the same about her own lines. The first citation, from "In This Age of Hard Trying, Nonchalance Is Good and," would suggest weapons, but of a defensive, not a first-strike, variety. Moore praises the power of indirection over the "haggish, uncompanionable drawl / of certitude," but then she mitigates that praise somewhat by tracing the origin of that power back to "selfprotectiveness" and revealing it, ultimately, as a byproduct of vulnerability. But this is nothing more than the age-old view of art as compensation.

Weapons or scalpels? Scalpels they assuredly are not. For the scalpel is an instrument designed to cut through surfaces; its purpose is to get the user *inside*. And Moore's art is anything but interior. She is a taxonomist, a gleaner, a weaver. The most thrilling feature of her poetry is its attentiveness and deliberation□the way she ranges over the intricate surfaces of the material and textual worlds, drawing forth what she needs with an avian fastidiousness. Moore's poems are not written from within; they are appliquéd.

She subjects what she has elicited from the near-infinite plenitude of the *out there* to the stringent ordering system of her syntax. She produces her effects through shocks of precision and shocks of juxtaposition. Our diffuse imaging of the world collides with her insistently accurate ordering of things. If she strikes an occasional depth, if she produces what appears to be a penetration, it is not by virtue of any probing action of her own. This comes about, rather, because we, as readers, are forced to make an inference out of certain bits of adjacent information. *We* make the sequences yield sense—*we* do the penetrating.

How odd it is, then, that Moore should on so many occasions adumbrate artistic values that her own craft belies. Reading over these quotations, we can abstract a clear preference for frankness over duplicity, simplicity over ornamentation and needless complexity, directness over sophistication, and "unconscious" naturalness over the straining for effect that is artifice. A preference, in short, for the genuine. But Moore's own poetry is nothing if not ironic and oblique. Her detailings are almost blindingly precise, but their accumulation produces a sly indirection. Moore is ornamental and deliberately disproportionate. When she inspects destiny, she does so with instruments more specialized than destiny itself. She is, herself, "principally throat"—and in this resides her idiosyncratic magic.

The tension between her beliefs—or, to use a Moore word, "preferences"—and her practice is immediately evident in these quoted passages. It manifests itself as a pervasive irony. Listen as she militates against complexity in a series of lines that are themselves semantically, syntactically, and prosodically complex:

Complexity,
moreover, that has been committed to darkness, instead
of
granting itself to be the pestilence that it is, moves
all
about as if to bewilder us with the dismal
fallacy that insistence
is the measure of all achievement and that all
truth must be dark.

What is this self-reflexive rhetorical stratagem but an effort to distance and disarm a truth that she is compelled to iterate?

There is a second, even more obvious sign of her tension, her peculiar entrapment between preference and practice. Moore relies heavily on displacement. She speaks with a domino held in front of her features. She assigns the burden of speaking the truth to some creature (a cat, for instance, in a poem I did not cite here—"The Monkeys"), or to some incorporated literary source, like Xenophon. When she does use her own voice, as in "Critics and Connoisseurs" or "Those Various Scalpels," the linguistic screen—complexity—is securely in place. For Moore could not turn her recognitions directly upon herself without thereby negating her sensibility and her poetic mode—the work could not survive.

And yet this is precisely what she has done in her one act of self-mutilation. She has pronounced her truth directly, in the first person, and the second version shows us what results when the poet abides by her own strictures. The piece might make more sense if it were called "My Poetry." . . .

If the original version of "Poetry" was the symbolic site of Moore's aesthetic assault upon herself, then we may reasonably regard it as rep- resenting the poetic sensibility that a part of her despised.

The poem is, in fact, a kind of anthology of the attributes and techniques that readers have most cherished in Moore□the very ones that made her the revolutionist she was. The original is prosy, prosodically sprawling; it is syntactically complex, to the point of near unintelligibility in places; it shows off Moore's taxonomic fetish, her delight in drawing together creatures from the various phyla of the natural and human worlds ("a tireless wolf □ the baseball fan"); it incorporates textual material from other sources (Tolstoy and A. H. Bullen on Yeats)□thereby sabotaging self-containment, and opening the poem out to the continuum of the printed word; it is rhetorically strategic, in the way that so many of her poems are, starting with a straightforward assertion, building and cantilevering sense outward until it almost evaporates (e.g., the sentence that begins, "When they become so derivative □"), then rounding to some clear assertion; it encloses, here more fully than elsewhere, an aesthetic formulation: a justification of what is now fashionably called framing.

The revised "Poetry" has eliminated everything but the prosiness. A short poem that is a shaved-down version of a well-known longer poem is not the same thing as an independent short poem□that should be obvious. Moore's second "Poetry" cannot be read except against the original text. It makes no declaration of independence. Indeed, Moore saw fit to include the first "Poetry" in the notes to her *Complete Poems*. We are asked to read her gesture, to puzzle out her reasons for disapproving of the original.

There are two ways of looking at the matter□ unless, of course, we ascribe her move to pure whimsy. If we think of the second version as a rewrite, then the poem has to be seen as a replacement, effectively canceling the first version. But then Moore would not have included it in her *Complete Poems* even as a note. More tellingly, the modifications made are not those of a rewrite, but an edit. She did not alter a single word. The words (most of them) have been struck out; only punctuation and spacing have been altered. We are compelled, therefore, to regard the second "Poetry" as an operation performed upon the first. A cut, an erasure□our choice of words here carries large implications, determines whether we regard her action as one of subliminal violence, or some mere agitated impatience. . . .

If the short poem *is* an edit, then what interpretation can we make? One benign possibility is that Moore recognized, as an editor might, a prolixity; she saw "Poetry" as verbose and she moved to rectify the matter. She made her cuts in a spirit of "Enough said!" But this does not get rid of the larger symbolic statement. For according to that criterion, the bulk of Moore's work is marred by a similar abundance. It is her very

method: to harvest and arrange. Trim one detail and you are soon throwing everything out the window.

The other possibility, to which I incline, is that Moore was deliberately repudiating everything that followed the first two sentences. Not just verbal superfluity, but manner and tone as well. The word "genuine" is placed for maximum impact. Moore was henceforth connecting genuineness with simple, direct, unsophisticated utterance. She was establishing it as the primary moving force of all real poetry. So much the worse that she could not attain it in her own work.

At the core of the issue is irony. Moore's poetry□ and her "Poetry"□is the apotheosis of ironic discourse. It belongs to "civilization" as opposed to "culture," which means, according to the Spenglerian definition I'm using, that it represents vital forces embalmed, order and intellection set above instinct and energy. All ironic usage implies selfconsciousness on the part of the speaker. An ironic statement does not fully coincide with itself□it incorporates a play between what is said and the underlying intention, between utterance and implication, between the content and the means. The etymology of the word gives us, from the Greek, "dissimulation" and "feigning"; an ironist is one who "says less than he thinks or means" (Skeat). Irony is, to put it bluntly, the inverse of the genuine.

We have Moore's statements on the matter. Using the image of the "drop," or concealing cloth, in "Pedantic Literalist," she asserts in no uncertain terms that duplicity□seen here as the gulf between affect and true feeling□is seen as inviting "destruction." In "Nothing Will Cure the Sick Lion," she strikes against the "masked ball attitude." Examples could be multiplied. And while in neither case is she addressing irony *per se*, she might as well be. Irony, like duplicity, depends upon a distance between feeling and expression; the difference between them is merely one of degree.

Irony, then, is the opposite of the "unconscious fastidiousness" that Moore celebrates in the child's attempt to prop the faltering pet (children, of course, are notoriously incapable of dissimulation). It shares nothing in common with the dog's reac- tion, the "few strong wrinkles puckering the skin between the ears," that she fastens upon in "Picking and Choosing." In poem after poem, as it turns out, she aligns herself with the *naïfs*, simple creatures and beings that coincide with themselves, that bear no taint of self-consciousness.

We can change what we do, but we cannot really change what we are. Moore was imprisoned□ by disposition, by sensibility□in a condition of ironic self-consciousness. She could fully comprehend its limitations, but she was powerless to achieve the poetic simplicity and force she admired. Consciousness moves along a unidirectional path□ it can strive to evolve, but it cannot undo previous evolutionary attainments. Moore was stuck.

Moore was not, however, a two-face. She did not say one thing while meaning another. No, her distinctive irony was the product of a disjunction between means and ends. Her technique, which we can see as her effort to come to terms with the gap between her

belief and her natural endowment, was to render up the mind's motion, its progress toward some realization or certainty□even though, *especially though*, that realization finally argued against the hesitant discursiveness of the process. Moore set out after simplicity along the only route she could take: that of complexity. She stalked unsophisticated truths in a sophisticated manner. She could not help herself. But when her eye beheld what her hand had done, she had to cry out against it. The mere tension between expression and content was not enough. One time, and one time only, she excised as superfluous the manneristic approach to truth and gave just the truth itself. The truth she gave□her recognition of the genuine□ reflected directly on her deed. And vice versa: The deed was the warranty for the words.

Considered by itself, without the ghost-text of the original, the short version of "Poetry" is Moore's worst poem. We should be happy that she did not thereafter insist that *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit* are always the same thing. She continued to spin out her delightful and sublimely ironic poems for a good many years. Though she had cut off all of her beautiful hair, it did grow back again.

Source: Sven Birkerts, "Marianne Moore's 'Poetry': She Disliked It, She Did," in *The Electric Life*, William Morrow, 1989, pp. 127-37.

Adaptations

Moore reads her poems on *Caedmon Treasury of Modern Poets Reading Their Own Poetry*, released by Caedmon/HarperAudio. Their address is P.O. Box 588, Dunmore, Pennsylvania 18512.

Caedmon/HarperAudio also carries *Marianne Moore Reading Her Poems & Fables from La Fontaine*.

In 1965, Audio-Forum released an audiocassete of Moore reading her poems, *Marianne Moore Reads Her Poetry*. Audio-Forum is part of Jeffrey Norton Publishers, 96 Broad St., Guilford, Connecticut 06437.

In 1987, The Annenberg/CPB Project produced *Voices and Visions*, a series of documentaries on modern American poetry that appeared on public television. A segment is devoted to Moore entitled *Marianne Moore: In Her Own Image*. Many libraries and video stores carry this series.

Topics for Further Study

Work in pairs: One person play the role of Moore and the other person play the role of a critic interviewing Moore about the meaning of her poem. Write up a transcript of the interview and exchange this with other students, comparing the variety of ways Moore is presented.

Write Moore's poem in paragraphs instead of lines. Does this change the meaning or the effect of the poem? What is lost and what is gained in the new version, and what does this have to say about the nature of poetry itself? Report your findings to your class.

Write a poem about a term that many people disagree on. In the poem, try to define this term. Then, read the poem to your class and discuss your responses.

Research the behavior of the animals that Moore describes. Is this behavior, in fact, unexplainable? Do you agree with her statement that "we do not admire what / we cannot understand?" Why or why not? Discuss your responses in groups.

If Moore were writing today, what examples would she use to describe behavior than cannot be explained? Work in groups and then list your ideas on the board.

Moore makes a number of claims for the idea of the "genuine." As a class, brainstorm definitions of this term and then work to come up with one on which the entire class can agree.

Work in groups: Make two lists and compare what Moore suggests about critics in "Poetry" with what she suggests about them in her poem "Critics and Connoisseurs." Discuss the lists as a class.

Compare the 1919 version of "Poetry" to the 1967 version, in which Moore cut the poem down to three lines. Which is more effective and why? Would including the earliest version in the footnotes for the final edition provide a helpful context for reading the poem? Discuss as a class whether or not footnotes alienate or inform a reader, and whether or not imagist poets might prefer an intertextual reading of Moore's poem versus a reading of the final three-line version as it stands.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: The Roaring Twenties in America was a time of prosperity and pleasure seeking, as people sought to recover from the changes wrought by World War I.

Today: Seeking to recover from a terrorist attack on New York City, Americans flaunt their patriotism and temper their spending. Millions of American flags are sold across the country.

1920s: Though some schools teach poetry and fiction writing, no one American college or university offers a degree in creative writing.

Today: Hundreds of American colleges and universities offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in creative writing. Many people holding these degrees take jobs teaching in universities.

1920s: The 19th Amendment gives American women the right to vote.

Today: Though women are better represented in industry and government than eighty years ago, they are still paid less than men in similar jobs.

1920s: There is a small boom in literary journals and magazines to showcase the work of experimental writers such as Ezra Pound, e. e. cummings, and Moore.

Today: The World Wide Web has made publishing easier and cheaper than ever. Literally thousands of "e-zines" featuring some very good and some very bad writing have debuted in the last decade, and more come online every day.

What Do I Read Next?

T. S. Eliot published his first collection of verse, *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917. Eliot was the major poetic voice in America during the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby*, widely considered to be the great American novel. This was just a few years after Moore published "Poetry."

Moore's collection of essays *Predilections*, published in 1955, contains essays on major poets such as Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound, and Moore's own idiosyncratic views on poetry and nature.

Moore alludes to William Butler Yeats's 1903 book, *Ideas of Good and Evil*, which contains essays on the poets Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake as well as essays on magic and mysticism.

Further Study

Abbott, Craig S., *Marianne Moore: A Descriptive Bibliography*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977.

Abbott lists primary and secondary material on Moore. This is an excellent research resource, though it stops at 1975.

Allen, Frederick Lewis, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*, Harper Perennial Library, 2000.

Originally published in 1931, *Only Yesterday* traces the rise of post-World War I prosperity up to the Wall Street crash of 1929. It is set against the backdrop of flappers, prohibition, and the rise of the women's suffrage movement.

Molesworth, Charles, *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life*, Atheneum, 1990.

Molesworth's biography is the best so far on Moore's life. Using Moore's correspondence and diaries, he deftly makes connections between the poet's work and her life.

Stapleton, Laurence, *Marianne Moore: The Poet's Advance*, Princeton University Press, 1978.

Stapleton's accessible critical study of Moore's poetry contains a good deal of biographical information and makes connections between her work, other poets and poetry.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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