Practice Study Guide

Practice by Ellen Bryant Voigt

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

□Practice□ appears in Ellen Bryant Voigt's 2002 poetry collection *Shadow of Heaven*. The title *Shadow of Heaven* is derived from these lines of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, quoted by David Baker in his review of Voigt's book: □What if Earth / Be but the shadow of Heaven, and things therein / Each to other like, more than on Earth is thought?□ Critics have noted that, as Voigt's sixth volume of published poetry, this book reflects her maturation as a woman and as a poet while preserving the themes and stylistic tendencies that have marked her past work. The accomplishment of this collection was recognized in its designation as a National Book Award finalist.

□Practice□ slowly unfolds an expression of deep emotional pain that ultimately reveals itself as grief. As the speaker considers the passage of time and its effect□or lack thereof□on heartache, she interjects a telling natural image. □Practice□ is not a lengthy poem, but it is dense and challenging, inviting the reader to uncover its layers of meaning. This poem is a fitting example of Voigt's work, especially her mature work, because it offers her characteristic clear voice; use of themes and images from nature; emotional subject matter; and sensitive, honest expression. Because it introduces the idea of an afterlife, it relates to the title of the book, making it a suitable representative of the volume as a whole.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1943

Ellen Bryant Voigt's poetry is known for its regionalism, its reflective character, and its everyday subject matter. She draws from her experiences as mother, wife, daughter, teacher, writer, and mentor. Her particular strain of feminism is not harsh or demanding, but instead seeks to demonstrate the inherent value of a woman's experience and the unique perspective it offers. She accomplishes this by being sensitive and honest and by writing in a way that is both accessible and thought provoking. Voigt's poems are often used to illustrate the existence and balance of opposing forces, such as good and evil or separation and connection. Her work has earned her a loyal following of readers and students as well as a number of awards, including fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, the 1983 Alice Fay di Castagnola Award from the Poetry Society of America, the 1983 Sara Teasdale Award, 1983 and 1991 Pushcart prizes, the 1986 Gretchen Warren Poetry Award, the 1987 Emily Clark Balch Award, the 1999 Hanes Poetry Award, and Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest awards in 1999 through 2002. From 1999 to 2003, Voigt was Vermont's state poet. In 2002, she was inducted into the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

Voigt was born May 9, 1943, in Danville, Virginia, to Lloyd Gilmore Bryant (a farmer) and Missouri Eleanor Bryant (an elementary school teacher). She describes her early years as having unfolded in a now-extinct culture, in which extended family gathered for Sunday dinner, her father sang in a barbershop quartet, and she played the piano at church. Her years of piano practice eventually evolved into a career as a concert pianist, and her musical background, in turn, has influenced her poetry. She cites Bach and Brahms as poetic influences.

Voigt earned a bachelor's degree from Converse College in South Carolina, graduating in 1964. Although she was initially drawn to the school for its music conservatory, she ultimately gravitated toward literature and began to seriously study poetry. She went on to complete a master of fine arts degree from the University of Iowa in 1966.

Voigt married Francis George Wilhelm Voigt, a college dean, on September 5, 1965. The couple had two children, Julia and William. In 1966, Voigt began teaching at Iowa Wesleyan College. In 1970, the family moved to Vermont, where Voigt accepted a position teaching in, and later overseeing, a new writing program at Goddard College. From 1979 to 1982, she was an associate professor of creative writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Since 1981, Voigt has been on the faculty of the master of fine arts program for writers at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina. In addition, she has served as a visiting writer at numerous universities and has worked on staff at writers conferences all over the United States.

Voigt's first published poetry collection, *Claiming Kin*, was released in 1976, thanks to a grant from the Vermont Council on the Arts. This volume was embraced by critics as promising and was praised for its union of subject matter and style. The publication of *Claiming Kin* and its subsequent critical attention opened new opportunities for Voigt. In 1983, her much-anticipated second volume of poetry was published; *The Forces of Plenty* conveys the experiences of a woman in her midlife years who is dealing with domestic ups and downs, changes in family dynamics, and the inevitable deepening of wisdom about life. In 1987, *The Lotus Flowers* was released. As in her previous work, regionalism plays a role in this book, alongside themes of nature, death, and home. In the 1990s, Voigt saw the publication of her next two collections, *Two Trees* (1992) and *Kyrie* (1995), the latter of which was a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award. Voigt released *Shadow of Heaven* in 2002 to rave reviews; it includes the poem □Practice□ and holds the honor of being a National Book Award finalist.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-6

The speaker in □Practice□ opens by describing seemingly unprovoked weeping. She mentions watching a clock, waiting to see it move as evidence that time is passing. Her attitude toward time, toward the thought of having to get through another day, is revealed in the phrase □dumb day,□ which seems to mean that the day is both ignorant and unknowing and also mute. The day, in other words, offers her no emotional support or comfort. She then asks if this experience of weeping and waiting for time to pass is □merely practice.□

Voigt sets up this first section as a single thought by waiting until the end of the sixth line to provide ending punctuation, in this case an inconclusive question mark. This choice expresses the speaker's uncertainty and vulnerability. Voigt also unifies the first six lines by structuring them with several infinitives (□to weep,□ □to wake,□ and □to wait□). This approach reflects the speaker's uncertainty, because the infinitives seem to lack an anchor. For example, the statement □I need to weep□ is more defined than the phrase □to weep.□ By using a series of infinitives, Voigt subtly illustrates the speaker's lack of direction in the midst of her emotional turmoil.

Lines 7-10

The next statement the speaker makes is very short: □Some believe in heaven, / some in rest.□ The speaker is pondering what happens after death, but she does not seem to have a strong belief of her own. She makes this statement casually and then turns her attention to someone to whom she is now speaking. At this point, she repeats what this other person has told her: □*We'll float,* / you said. *Afterward / we'll float between two worlds* .□ She is somehow taken with the idea that after death, people retain a connection to this world.

Lines 11-15

The speaker is then distracted by her own thoughts. Voigt introduces an image□it is unclear whether the image is real or imagined□of five beetles in a peony blossom. The beetles are helpless, □drugged by lust,□ and the speaker remarks that if she came back as a bird, she would remember that image. This comment is telling in two ways. First, it reveals that the speaker considers the idea that after death, souls return to earth in another form. Second, it reveals that she sees the world as dangerous and opportunistic. If she were a bird, she would look for bugs to eat in peony blossoms, where they are apparently defenseless.

Lines 16-17

In the last two lines of the poem, Voigt brings the speaker back to her conversation with the unseen other person. The digression about the beetles is contained within dashes, so the reader should be aware that the thought in the last two lines completes the thought in lines 9 and 10. To clarify, Voigt puts the unseen person's comments in italics. An important revelation in the last two lines of the poem is that the source of the speaker's pain□alluded to by the references to life after death□is grief at the loss of a loved one. The speaker says, □*until everyone we love / is safe* is what you said.□ This remark indicates that the speaker is pained at not being able to keep everyone she loves safe. Ending with □is what you said□ suggests that the speaker is not entirely sure that she agrees with what the other person has told her, because she does not adopt the belief as her own. This sentiment is rooted in the same uncertainty and vulnerability that the speaker describes at the beginning of the poem. Voigt, therefore, gives us a snapshot of deep pain and grief, rather than portraying someone's growing and moving through a painful experience.

Themes

Grief

In the first three words of □Practice,□ Voigt establishes that this is a poem about emotional pain. □To weep unbidden□ are words that describe pain from within, and as the poem unfolds and discusses death and then ends with a reference to loved ones, the reader understands that the speaker is pained by the loss of someone she loved. The speaker considers different views on what happens when someone dies. Perhaps they go to heaven, perhaps they merely rest, perhaps they somehow drift between the two worlds, or perhaps they return to earth in another form. These thoughts come so easily to the speaker that the reader cannot help but believe that the speaker has given these notions some thought, yet the tone of the poem indicates that she is still unsure of what she personally believes. It is a struggle for her to find peace in something, but uncertainty about the afterlife does not provide it.

The speaker's grief is not mild, as indicated by her uncontrollable weeping. It wakes her at night, and it makes time pass too slowly. She watches the clock as if seeing time pass will ease her pain, but it does not. Her question □is this merely practice?□ seems to reflect a pessimistic and fatalistic view of what it means to live in the world. According to the speaker, enduring such pain might be practice for enduring future loss. In any case, by the end of the poem, the speaker has not found any real meaning in her pain or her loss.

Life after Death

The second half of the poem is concerned with various explanations for what happens after a person dies. The speaker comments that some people believe in heaven, while others believe that death is a state of perpetual rest. The latter may refer to the belief that there actually is no afterlife and that once the body dies, it is the end of the person's life entirely. In contrast, the idea of heaven is that when the body dies, the person's soul goes on to an eternity of peace and joy.

The speaker then considers the explanation offered by an unseen other, who states that after death, people float between the mortal world and the immortal world. This idea seems to open up the possibility of having the best of both realities, with the dead being able to keep a connection to loved ones left behind. In the speaker's tangent about five beetles in a peony, she remarks offhandedly that she would remember the image of the beetles if she came back as a bird. This introduces the idea of reincarnation and of returning to earth in a different form after death.

Mortality

Faced with the experience of grief, the speaker cannot help but consider mortality and the circle of life. Voigt introduces the theme of mortality in several different ways. First, the speaker describes waiting for the clock to advance the day forward, even though time's passage brings no relief. Mortality is closely tied to time because only the mortal world is subject to the limits and challenges of time. Further, a being that is mortal will eventually run out of time. The presentation of the clock as an enemy supports this theme.

Another way Voigt approaches the theme of mortality is by exploring the speaker's uncertainty about immortality. The speaker is sure only of what she knows, which in this case is the inevitable pain of living in the world and facing her own mortality and the mortality of her loved ones. On the subject of immortality in the afterlife, she is unable to reach a conclusion, which sets up tension between the speaker's pain at the mortality that is central to this life and uncertainty about whether there is such a thing as immortality. The result is a feeling of hopelessness and despair.

The third way the speaker illustrates the theme of mortality is through her depiction of the beetles and the bird. Here, she describes the circle of life; some creatures must perish so that others may live. The five helpless beetles are at the mercy of a hungry bird, which will not likely dispense mercy. Much more subtle is the fact that the beetles may be in the peony because they are looking for something to eat. So, just as the bird would eat the beetles, the beetles would eat from the peony. Together, these elements depict the circle of life in nature, as it takes place every day.

Style

Imagery

□Practice□ is written in only seventeen short lines. Voigt makes the most of her brevity by introducing strong, compelling imagery that serves multiple purposes. The first image is that of the clock with its □whisker□ (hand) twitching. The use of the word □whisker□ brings the clock to life, as if it were an animal with the power to make time progress. The image is believable because the reader can immediately understand that a clock resembles an animal's face, but the image also reveals the speaker's feelings about time. In her grief-stricken state, the speaker feels that time is not on her side. She wishes that it would pass more quickly, perhaps by being subject to the will of a living thing. Although she knows that time passes at its own pace, regardless of her wants, she indulges the idea that time can be manipulated. Mourning can be a very lonely experience, so the speaker may also long to see the face of another living thing, like a cat, to save her from her solitude.

The next image is that of floating between two worlds after death. This is a vague image, which is fitting for something otherworldly and ambiguous. Still, the image is a peaceful one, in which the souls of the dead float effortlessly and seemingly of their own will from the earthly world to the world of the afterlife. The image of floating contrasts with the heaviness of the pain and the struggle the speaker feels.

The last image is of □five bronze beetles□ who are □drugged by lust□ in a peony blossom. The image is beautiful, bright, and sensual. Peonies are very lush flowers with numerous fluttering petals, and the image of five shining beetles crowded inside one is breathtaking. Added to the visual picture is the idea that the scent of the peony (which is similar to a rose) is so strong that it has rendered the beetles helpless and blissful. While Voigt creates this stunning scene from nature, she chooses to show the speaker's dark side through it. The speaker does not marvel at the image or take comfort in the beauty of nature; instead, she tells herself that if she comes back as a bird, she will remember those defenseless beetles in that peony. The implication is that five beetles make a very satisfying meal for a bird.

Alliteration

Throughout □Practice,□ Voigt emphasizes certain words or images by using alliteration□the repetition of consonant sounds in neighboring words. This is an efficient and noninvasive way to give special attention to certain words in such a brief poem. The first three lines include the following words: weep, wake, weep (again), wait, and whisker. Voigt's use of alliteration in these lines gives them unity and a subtle distinction from the next part of the poem. When she then writes □dumb day,□ she gives the term auditory punch. Reading the poem aloud, a listener would hear the alliterative words very clearly because of the hard, thumping sound they create. Similarly, in Voigt's image

of the beetles and the peony, she describes the bugs as “five bronze beetles / stacked like spoons.” By using alliteration, Voigt brings a very specific image into sharp focus without having to go into extraneous detail.

Historical Context

America after September 11

When the World Trade Center towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., were hit by hijacked passenger planes, daily life for Americans in every region and walk of life was affected to some degree. While feelings and attitudes were much more intense in the months immediately following the terrorist attacks, Americans still cite the attack as a part of the fabric of their communities and their everyday lives. Perhaps the most enduring effects of the attacks are that Americans feel less □bulletproof□ than they did before, and they regard their loved ones as even more precious. Witnessing the desperation and grief of the families who lost loved ones in the attacks, including rescue workers, was a life-altering experience for many people. Americans did not have to be directly affected by the attacks or the devastating aftermath to feel the weight of the tragedy.

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, based in Washington, D.C., prepared a survey on post-September 11 attitudes. Their findings were based on Gallup polls, independent research, and surveys conducted in November 2001. They found that since September 11 religion has become more important to Americans but acceptance of diversity in religious life has not suffered. Americans are better educated about and more tolerant of Muslim Americans, despite the fact that the terrorists were Muslim. The Pew Research Center found that although Americans cited religion as increasingly important in their lives, participation in worship services and attendance at other religious events has not increased. On the other hand, Pew researchers also found that while people may not be participating more in organized worship, they do claim to have more active prayer lives. In fact, 44 percent of the people surveyed in November 2001 answered that they pray more than they did in March 2001. This figure is down, however, from the 69 percent who, in a survey conducted September 13-17, 2001, said they prayed more. Examining the answers very closely, Pew researchers found that most of the increased religious activity was from □highly religious□ Americans already attending church, whose church activity subsequently increased after the terrorist attacks.

The Pew Research Center reported that Americans gave higher priority to their family lives as of November 2001 (when the study was conducted). Almost 40 percent said they tried to spend more time with their families over the holidays, and over half of the parents surveyed said they were setting aside more time to spend with their children. Women were especially motivated to connect with family members; while 41 percent of women sought extra time with family, 33 percent of men reported the same. Similarly, 59 percent of mothers were making a stronger effort to spend time with their children, as opposed to 47 percent of men.

Religious Diversity

In modern-day America, there is great effort to promote religious tolerance so that everyone may enjoy freedom of religion. Although surveys still show that Judeo-Christian denominations are the largest religious population, other religions have growing communities of believers. According to the American Religious Identity Survey conducted in 2001, 76.5 percent of Americans are Christian, 1.3 percent are Jewish, and 13.2 percent consider themselves nonreligious. In addition, 0.5 percent of the population are Muslim, another 0.5 percent are Buddhist, and 0.4 percent are Hindu; while these numbers make up a small percentage of the population, they represent increased numbers over a decade ago. The number of Muslims between 1990 and 2001 more than doubled, the number of Buddhists rose 170 percent, and the number of Hindus grew 237 percent. In contrast, the number of agnostics dropped 16 percent, now accounting for 0.5 percent of the population.

The growing diversity in the religious life of Americans is significant to the culture. Americans are more likely to discuss religious views with people of other faiths, and they are more likely to consider new beliefs. They are also, in many cases, better educated or at least more aware of the beliefs that other religions espouse. Communities and schools are making more efforts to raise awareness of and sensitivity to differing belief systems.

Critical Overview

Voigt's standing in American poetry has brought comparisons to great poets of the past and present. When Voigt served as Vermont's poet laureate, Rebecca Dinan Schneider of *Writer* generously praised her, writing, □Following in the footsteps of such luminaries as Robert Frost, Galway Kinnell and Louise Gluck might be challenging, but Vermont's fourth state poet, Ellen Bryant Voigt, is up to the task.□ Critics often discuss Voigt's work in the context of modern southern poetry, again drawing comparisons to numerous respected poets. She is regarded not just as an important female voice but also as a poet with a particular perspective, purpose, and sensitivity. In their book *Teaching the Art of Poetry*, David Cappella and Baron Wormser observe:

Urged forward by social changes in recent decades, poets such as Betty Adcock, Carol Cox, Kate Daniels, Lola Haskins, Elizabeth Morgan, Martha McFerren, Dara Wier, Margaret Gibson, and Ellen Bryant Voigt have published already a body of work as visibly a part of southern culture as it is astringent, feminist, and formally challenging.

The essayist J. D. McClatchy (quoted in *Teaching the Art of Poetry: The Moves*) considers Voigt to be among the best of the modern women poets. In his essay □Twenty Questions,□ which appears in his book by the same title, McClatchy remarks:

It is interesting□from a purely sociological point of view□to note that these younger generations have many more strong women poets than earlier generations did. It may be merely coincidental□certainly no woman in the past was kept from writing poetry by any malign political conspiracy. It's just that the good women writers tended to be novelists rather than poets. Not today. Louise Gluck, Sandra McPherson, Marilyn Hacker, the late Amy Clampitt, Jorie Graham, Rachel Hadas, Rita Dove, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, Mary Jo Salter, Ellen Bryant Voigt, Debora Greger, Thylias Moss, Heather McHugh, Alice Fulton□it's a crowded field.

Critics embraced *Shadow of Heaven*, in which □Practice□ appears, and they have praised its clarity, subject matter, and craftsmanship. In a review of *Shadow of Heaven* for *Booklist*, Donna Seaman describes the poems in this collection as □exact in their forms, and calm in tone, refined distillations of deep feelings and long meditations on nature and life.□ Seaman is impressed by the discipline apparent in Voigt's work, in which the poems are thoughtfully written with attention to form and word choice. □Practice□ is a good example of Voigt's precise use of language.

A few critics point to the influence of the Romantic poets on Voigt's work. Judith Harris in the *Women's Review of Books* observes that Voigt's poems are □perfectly realized, rare in their formal variety and textured innovations on the lyric.□ She says that *Shadow of Heaven* is □Keatsian in its themes□ but that □Voigt's poems reach into abstraction only when the literal has been exhausted.□ In his *Poetry* review of *Shadow of Heaven*, David Baker sees a surprising relationship between Voigt's poetry and that of traditional Romantic poets. He explains:

It's fascinating to see a belated romanticism like Voigt's. . . . I am constantly struck by the fine particulars of her work, her faith in the extended, storied detail, when many earlier romantics made their mature and later lyrics increasingly abstract or obtuse.

Voigt's poetry often reflects the relationship between people and nature, a relationship that can be instructive, moving, comforting, or tumultuous. Her work also is generally characterized by emotional honesty. In *Publishers Weekly*, Michael Scharf and Jeff Zaleski find *Shadow of Heaven* to be □dominated by mourning and memory□ and place it among Voigt's best work. Comparing the □more casual work□ that appears later in the book to the poems at the beginning of the book (where □Practice□ appears), Scharf and Zaleski conclude, □Readers will return more often . . . to the clear voice in the first sections.□

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she provides a close reading of Ellen Bryant Voigt's poem to reveal how the grief expressed is a specific kind of grief. It is newly inflicted and is also the speaker's first experience with grief.

Voigt's carefully wrought poem □Practice□ is featured in her sixth volume of poetry, *Shadow of Heaven*. In it, the speaker expresses the deep, penetrating pain of grief at having lost a loved one. The reader is challenged to read the poem closely to understand the speaker's feelings, because the speaker is too pained to be able to explain herself in a clear and organized way. Even though the speaker in □Practice□ is not chaotic in her expression, there are definite signals throughout the poem that the grief is over a recent loss and that this is the speaker's first experience with such pain. This poem is one that is easily skimmed, given a cursory reading, but to do so robs the reader of the subtle emotional underpinnings of the speaker's expression. Voigt brings her talent and experience as a poet to this poem to give it rich layers of meaning and emotional honesty.

In human experience and in its poetic expression, there are many kinds of grief. The one felt by the speaker in □Practice□ has a specific character, but readers who have endured grief can relate to the speaker's heartache. Right from the beginning, the speaker begins giving clues that the grief she feels is from a very recent loss. The first two lines of the poem read, □To weep unbidden, to wake / at night in order to weep.□ These words reveal that the pain is so deeply felt that when she weeps, her sobbing seems to be completely unprovoked. The pain is also very disruptive, actually waking her from much-needed rest to weep even more. This need for almost constant emotional release is common when a person is struggling with the shock of an unexpected loss. At first, there is little else than the pain, and the person has no choice but to endure the suffering until the experience is better internalized and his or her life begins to make sense again. That the weeping wakes the speaker from sleeping indicates that the person has not yet absorbed the loss and that the shock of the loss is ever present.

The speaker describes watching the face of the clock, waiting for it □to twitch□ the day away. At this point, time is the speaker's enemy, and it is something she wishes would pass quickly. Not much time has elapsed between the news of the loss and the moment of the poem. Until the speaker has the benefit of the passing of more time, the loss will continue to feel very near. The saying that time heals all wounds is meaningless to her because healing has not yet begun. Her referring to □the dumb day□ offers a double meaning. Not only is the day unknowing and uncaring, it is also mute and offers no words of reassurance. The speaker is alone in a room with just a clock that offers no relief.

A friend suggests that after death □*we'll float between two worlds*.□ The speaker considers that perspective, presumably because she wants to cling to the idea that the one she loved and lost is not so far away after all. If her loved one is floating between the two worlds, then there is a possibility that he or she is present, maybe even in the very room where the speaker is sitting and weeping. This helps her feel that the relationship with the lost loved one is not lost but has just taken on a new form. She longs to reestablish a connection and feel close again.

Without transition, the speaker veers off into describing a scene from nature. The disjointed and distracted nature of this sudden aside demonstrates the speaker's inability to focus at this early stage of grief. The sudden departure occurs during a discussion of the afterlife, indicating her need to think about something else. In the digression, the speaker describes five bronze beetles crowded in a single peony, revealing a very angry and vengeful side of her grief. This is also an indicator that the loss is recent. Psychologists generally agree that there are five stages of grief through which people pass on their way to accepting loss. The first is denial, which clearly does not apply to the speaker, and the next is anger. She describes a beautiful, contented scene of five beetles □stacked like spoons□ and □drugged by lust□ in the intensely fragrant peony, yet she does not find in this image a soothing promise of peacefulness in nature; instead, she sees an opportunity for the vicious cycle of nature to unfold. She states that if she came back to earth as a bird, she would remember that image. The reader can assume that since birds eat bugs, the speaker is drawn to the idea of participating in the circle of life as the taker of life. She is tired of feeling like a victim to the cycle of life and death and takes some pleasure in imagining being the instigator. Her willingness to take advantage of the beetles in their helpless state (□drugged□) may be an important clue to the speaker's devastation. She may be hinting that the one she lost was helpless at the moment of death and that the event was unexpected.

The poem also provides clues that the speaker is experiencing grief for the first time. Her question □is this merely practice?□ suggests that she is lost, victimized, and confused by her grief. It also expresses a fatalistic and cynical response to her loss and the emotional pain she cannot escape. She wonders if enduring the grieving process is something that will be a recurring theme for the rest of her life and if this first time is practice for the next time and the next. The thought that such loss might be reduced to □merely practice□ is devastating, and it is no wonder that the speaker feels cynicism toward the world.

Faced with loss, many people seek comfort and answers in their beliefs about the afterlife. The speaker in □Practice□ seems to be confronting these ideas in earnest for the first time. She casually reviews that some people believe in heaven, while others believe in rest. She talks to a friend, repeating what he or she has offered as a possible explanation, and, in her beetle tangent, she introduces the possibility of reincarnation. What is very significant is that she does not adopt any of these views as her own. She restates what others believe, but she does not seem to have an opinion or perspective of her own. She remarks, □Some believe in heaven, / some in rest. *We'll float*, / you said.□ These are the beliefs of other people (□some□ and □you□) but not of the speaker. This is a strong indication that her current experience is the first time that she

has really considered these ideas in the context of a personal loss. It also indicates that she is having an especially hard time finding any comfort. While she longs to reconnect with the one she has lost, she is not even sure where he or she is.

Finally, in the last two lines, the speaker's tone is forlorn and cynical. She is reminding her friend that he or she claimed that in the afterlife, people float between the two worlds □*until everyone we love* / *is safe* is what you said.□ The speaker does not claim this sentiment as her own but instead feels as if her friend has made a promise, and she intends to hold him or her to that promise. She is unconvinced, however, and the lines seem to express uncertain desperation, as if she is afraid of being misled. At the same time, this concluding statement carries a touch of cynicism in its tone. Her cynical response indicates that she is trying to work through her first experience with grief. She lacks any previous experience or wisdom of her own. She does not yet embrace the belief in the safety of her loved ones in the afterlife. By putting the idea back on her friend, the speaker shows that she is still unconvinced. Unfortunately, this means that she has not found any real source of peace or comfort. As the poem draws to a close, the speaker is no closer to accepting the death of her loved one. She is not ready to heal, and the poem has come full circle. The insecurity of the last lines surely means that she will continue to □weep unbidden, to wake / at night in order to weep,□ as she described in the first lines of the poem.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on □Practice,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Kerschen is a public school administrator and freelance writer. In this essay, she discusses how the poem Practice fits into the tradition of lyric poetry and the poetic practices of Voigt.

Voigt is best known as a writer of lyric poetry, although she is also a teacher and critic of poetry. She has written numerous articles and essays on the subject of the structure of poetry in which she has strongly defended the value of lyric poetry. Voigt's poem □Practice,□ published in her 2002 collection entitled *Shadow of Heaven*, is a good example of the classic elements of lyric poetry and her poetic works in general.

The most important characteristic of lyric poetry is its musical quality. In ancient Greek times, poets accompanied their works with music played on a lyre; thus the name *lyric* is applied to poetry that relies on the sound of words to create music from language. Not surprisingly, Voigt started out at college as a music major but became more captivated by the poetic music of language than by the instrumental music of her piano. Still, her connection to music remains strong. Tony Hoagland, writing in *Ploughshares*, reports that Voigt has said her poetic influences were □Bach and, later, Brahms.□ Further, Voigt has been quoted in *Writer* as saying that her □formula□ for poetry is □precision about this world, mystery about the other world□and music.□ She added, □I hear a piece of music in the poem: a line, sentence, something working, which in turn establishes the tone.□

□Practice,□ a poem that ponders the relationship of life on earth with that in heaven, fits this formula. The precision comes in the description of the □whisker on the face of the clock□ to convey the agonizingly slow passage of time, one □twitch□ at a time, when one is in mourning. The mystery comes from the subject, one of the greatest mysteries of human life: the question of the relationship of this life to the afterlife. The music comes from the poetic devices of language that make a poem musical and a song memorable, such as internal forms of repetition.

The alliteration of the first stanza in □Practice□ repeats the consonant *w* in □weep,□ □wake□ (first line), □weep,□ □wait□ (second line), and □whisker□ (third line). □Wake□ and □wait□ even add a moment of rhyme. There is also repetition in the construction of phrases: □Some believe in heaven, / some in rest□ and □*We'll float*□ (line 8) and, again, □*we'll float*□ (line 10). Alliteration is used once more in the third stanza, with the *b* sound of □bronze,□ □beetles,□ □blossom,□ □back,□ and □bird.□ An *s* sound is used in line 12, □stacked like spoons,□ and in the last line, □*is safe* is what you said.□

Lyric poetry is characterized by a short length, a commonplace subject, and an intensity of feelings. □Practice□ fits all these characteristics. It is only seventeen lines long. Its dual subject is two experiences that virtually every human goes through: grief over the loss of a loved one and wondering about the afterlife. Since these two experiences are highly charged with emotion, there is an automatic intensity of feeling, both on the part

of the poet and in the reaction of the reader. Emotions invoked include grief over the loss of a loved one, loneliness resulting from the separation, the feeling that time has gone into slow motion to drag out one's pain, anxiety over the future both in this life and the next, and curiosity about the next life, if it exists. The grief and loneliness are expressed through the depiction of weeping, sleeplessness, and the slow passage of time. There is also a hint of despair in the poem: □moving / the dumb day forward□ indicates that the narrator does not see the point in going on without the lost love. Days are no longer new opportunities, just a dumb idea. The narrator is asking □What's the point?□ when the second stanza opens with □is this merely practice?□

Voigt's poetry is noted for having an element of opposition, juxtaposition, and that is definitely found in □Practice□ with the questions of how and why concerning life on earth versus life in heaven. The title of the collection that contains this poem, *Shadow of Heaven*, is a phrase taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: □what if Earth / Be but the shadow of Heaven, and things therein / Each to other like, more than on Earth is thought?□ In a review of Voigt's book for *Poetry*, David Baker, who quotes Milton's line, says that □Voigt delights in such ironic pleasures□ and has, throughout her career, □pitted dialectical forces against each other.□ Baker finds that in *Shadow of Heaven*, □Voigt's powers of opposition are stronger and more vivid than ever.□

This opposition also involves an opposition to narrative, as evidenced by the title of another of Voigt's articles: □Narrative and Lyric: Structural Corruption.□ Although she admits that the two can be used together effectively in a poem, she defines the □pure□ lyric as one in which □the reader is divorced from narrative context, and even narrative speculation.□ The plotline of lyric poetry, she says, is built from sounds and feelings, and progression is achieved thorough repeated sounds. The alliteration and repeated phrase structures of □Practice□ give the lines of the poem a pull from one to another, but this is not a □and then, and then□ structure. The subject from the first stanza about weeping and waiting on time is changed to the subject of what is involved in the afterlife in the second stanza, thus moving from one emotion to another with the connecting line □is this merely practice?□ The first line of the second stanza is a natural mental transition from contemplating one's lost love to wondering if one will ever see that person again in another life; that is, it is a plotline of feelings.

The third stanza is a further break from narrative. In a list of recommendations on how to avoid the narrative in poetry, Voigt continues, in her article, to advise that the reader should be distracted from narrative by deactivating time. In □Practice□ this technique is accomplished with the use of the third stanza to break into the narrator's remembrance of the description the lost love had given about the afterlife. In real life, our thoughts often jump around as one thought leads us to suddenly think of something else. Trying to envision floating between two worlds, heaven and earth, the narrator imagines coming back to earth as a bird who remembers where the beetles, absorbed in a feeding frenzy on the peony, are easy prey.

In an article for the *Southern Review*, □In Defense of Lyric,□ Voigt opines that □emotional life is finally all that connects us, one to another, in what used to be called the human condition.□ This □old-fashioned view,□ Voigt says, □stands at the heart of

the lyric project.□ She explains that great poems do not have to deal with □extraordinary life circumstances□ but instead □a relentless 'striving to be accurate' and, sometimes, a certain ruthlessness toward the very sensibility that produces the poem.□ In □Practice,□ the third stanza is not a ruthless interruption necessarily, but it is a break from the original feelings of grief□a time-out, so to speak, for a more lighthearted emotion. Nonetheless, the connection between the living person and the dead person is, of course, strictly emotional at this point, but nonetheless real.

In *Writer*, Rebecca Dinan Schneider quotes Voigt on Robert Frost, as she explains

'A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom.' Poetry is made of delight: delight at the sounds of words, delight in a formal arrangement, delight in a precise image or in something inexplicable you see in the world. . . . But in the end, it needs to uncover something.

Apparently, Betty Adcock, in a review of *Shadow of Heaven* for the *Southern Review*, finds Voigt successful in applying this principle to her work. Adcock concludes that Voigt's work rewards close reading because □small beauties of the line, echoes of metaphor, carry the poem toward true lyric closure, the surprise that does not simply close but continues the possibilities.□ In □Practice,□ the two-line last stanza does indeed continue the possibilities. What is meant by □*until everyone we love / is safe*□? Does she mean safe from damnation, safe from the pains of the world? If we will float between two worlds until everyone we love is safe, what happens when your loved ones are all present? Do we make the transition to heaven together? Are we freed to go back to earth as birds? Voigt leaves the reader to speculate on the possibilities.

Voigt is often described as a classical poet in that she is loyal to the traditions of lyric poetry. One of the traditions for which Voigt is particularly noted is the inclusion of nature in a poem, a device in which she excels, according to the critics. Ken Tucker, in a review of *Shadow of Heaven* for the *New York Times Book Review*, says that her descriptions of nature are rich and that □every tree, bird or insect resonates with symbolism for the life of a relative or a complex emotion.□ When this critique is applied to □Practice,□ the third stanza takes on even more meaning. Do the five bronze beetles represent the lost love that the narrator would pursue as a bird? Would the bird approach with the same lustful yearning that the beetles are experiencing for the peony? Whatever the possibilities for interpretation, it remains that the description of the beetles on the peony achieves the goal of a lyric poet: to leave a memorable image for the reader.

Donna Seaman, reviewing *Shadow of Heaven* for *Booklist*, remarks on the □meditations on nature and life as seen flourishing in wondrous manifestations right in her own backyard□ that Voigt brings to her poems. Certainly, □Practice□ provides a scene from that backyard with the third stanza's beetles, peony blossom, and bird. The poem may be about grief and the afterlife, but Voigt's poetic talent manipulates the structure to make room for a nature scene and to make use of that scene for dramatic impact. Critics also often comment on the tension and balance usually found in Voigt's poems. In □Practice,□ there is a tension established and a balance of subject achieved

between life on earth and life in the afterworld. Similarly, there is a tension in the remark from the departed person that is split by an intervening stanza and the balance established between contemplation of the spiritual set against contemplation of the beetles □stacked like spoons□ on the peony blossom.

Voigt wrote a lengthy article on syntax, □Syntax: Rhythm of Thought, Rhythm of Song,□ for *Kenyon Review* in 2003. In it she explains that syntax identifies the order of language, that is, how the words are put together. Obviously, for a poet, syntax is critical when it comes to pattern and variation, balance and asymmetry, repetition and surprise. However, Voigt adds that poetry likewise makes use of another rhythmic system besides that of syntax, and that is the rhythm of the line. She asserts that □uneven stanza and sentence length allow energy and variation into a poem.□ A good poem orchestrates these two rhythmic systems of syntax and line. □Practice,□ then, qualifies as a good poem because even though the line and stanza lengths are basically the same throughout, the sentence length is carefully controlled for effect. The opening sentence runs the length of the first stanza and into the first line of the second stanza. The next sentence runs one and a half lines, or seven words, and the next sentence is just four words. The sentence after that is the one interrupted by the third stanza. This variation keeps the reader awake and on the hook.

Another element of the classic tradition in lyric poetry is homelike familiarity and a clarity of verse that makes the poem seem simple even as it carries a profound reflection on issues of importance. Once again, Voigt epitomizes the lyric poet with □Practice□ because of its simple structure, encompassing the complex issues of love, grief, life, death, and the afterlife, all built around a moment of natural beauty as beetles savor a garden blossom. If lyric poetry is the emotional expression of deep feelings that have sprung up from the poet's heart to touch others with their musical language and thoughtful insights, then Voigt has succeeded in offering □Practice□ as a lyric poem.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on □Practice,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Hart is a published author and freelance writer. In the following essay, Hart explores the hints that Voigt offers to suggest the underlying meaning in her poem.

How can anyone interpret the meaning of a poem□a collection of abbreviated phrases, words placed just so and chosen for rhythm and sound as well as to express an emotion□such as Voigt's □Practice?□ How can readers be expected to find significance in this type of writing when so much information is left out? Some poets claim that despite the fact that they consciously chose the words and phrases, even they are not completely sure of some of their poems' deeper intentions. Other poets read their own poems to learn more about themselves, as if the poems were as much messages to the writers as they might be to those who read them. How, then, does one unscramble these poetic puzzles? One way is to search for hints that the poet, consciously or unconsciously, has left behind.

Voight's poem is full of such clues. One of the first clues signals that the subject of this poem is sad or, even more dramatic, tragic. Evidence for this conclusion can be derived from the first two words. □To weep,□ the poet begins. And readers must then wonder what it is that is making the speaker of the poem cry. But before that can be accomplished, readers must listen to the speaker, who takes the time to first emphasize her sorrow. In doing so, the speaker makes readers aware that this sorrow of hers is not a passing emotion. She is not merely crying; her tears fall even though she does not consciously ask for them. They appear □unbidden□; it is as if they come of their own accord, appearing without her being able to control them. Moreover, the speaker's weeping is so strong it awakens her from her sleep. From these first clues, readers can already deduce that this poem is meant to relay no ordinary grief. This poem is not about a momentary depression. The tears that are flowing are rooted in some event that has caused a dramatic change in the speaker's life, something more aligned with tragedy. Because the poem has begun with such gravity, one cannot help but consider that it might be about death.

If this is true, readers may wonder at this point, who has died? And what kind of relationship did this unnamed person have with the speaker of this poem? Even though there are no direct references to anyone□no name is provided, not even a gender-specific pronoun like *he* or *she*□there is a somewhat oblique mention of masculinity. The speaker uses the word □whisker,□ which may or may not have been meant to indicate gender. In other words, this small detail of a whisker might not have any association whatsoever with the person the speaker of this poem is addressing. But then why did the poet choose this particular image? And although the whisker is used to denote the slow passing of time, it is curious how the mind works. For instance, at the mention of a whisker, some readers might immediately get a masculine impression. Men have whiskers on their faces, especially at night. Could the speaker, who has been awakened by her tears, be thinking of a male lover who once slept in her bed? Could she be mourning the death of a male friend? Although readers may never know for sure either the reason for the poet's choice of this word or the true importance of this image

of a whisker, it still lends a hint of masculinity to the poem. Of course, the reason behind the poet's selection of this word could have absolutely nothing to do with a man and provides only an image of how slowly time is passing.

As readers continue through the poem, it becomes evident that it offers no more clues to certain answers of these questions. Rather, the speaker moves away from any further reference to the person about whom she is writing and returns to describing her feelings. She focuses on the burden of her sorrow, which she demonstrates by suggesting that it makes time go by so slowly. The speaker watches the hands on the □face of the clock,□ waiting for them to move, a habit to which many readers will relate. When one feels anxious about the present moment and wishes to be taken out of one's current emotional state, time seems to drag endlessly. Watching the hands on a clock only worsens the situation. But even when time does inevitably pass, the speaker suggests that this has little worthwhile purpose. The inevitable new day that is dawning, as the speaker describes it, is □dumb.□ The day, in other words, holds no significance for her, since the death of her friend has stripped life of its meaning. The speaker has no reason to go on, or at least this is what is implied.

Moving on to the second stanza, the speaker asks the question □Is this merely practice?□ This, in turn, requires readers to ask more questions of their own. What is the speaker talking about here? To what kind of practice is she referring? If this poem is about death, is the speaker relating the awful emotional hollowness that she is experiencing to the pain of death? Is she saying that she believes that the sorrow that she is currently feeling might be comparable to what she will feel when she dies? Does she think that her own death will feel like the emptiness of her present sorrow? The fact that the speaker is asking these questions suggests that she is not sure of what she believes in. Although death is an unknown, most people speculate at some time in their lives what death is like and may even wonder what, if anything, exists as an afterlife. Is this what the poet is doing? To gain further insight in order to unravel the meaning, readers have to push forward from this point, hoping that the poet will offer more information to help answer these questions.

The next thing that happens in this poem is that the speaker lists a few philosophical ideas that she might hold about an afterlife. □Some believe in heaven, / some in rest.□ The word □heaven□ confirms that the speaker is definitely concentrating on the possibility of an afterlife and also suggests a religious connotation. Readers cannot be sure if this is the speaker's belief, but the guesswork about whether or not this is a poem whose subject is death is laid to the side. At this point in the poem, the theme of death is not just hinted at; it is, in fact, made concrete. Readers have gathered enough information now to confirm this. The clues that follow will help illuminate the speaker's intent, helping readers decide if the poet is writing about the death of a friend or if she is writing because she is concerned about her own death. First, the speaker provides further hints as to whom this poem is directed.

Although no further details are given about the specific person who has died, the speaker does give a clue about her relationship to this person. She uses the pronoun □we,□ for example, which implies a connection between the speaker and the unnamed

person. Whoever this person was, he or she thought of himself or herself as being part of a couple with the speaker of the poem. "*We'll float*," this unnamed person had said at one point before his or her death. Then the speaker continues the phrase with the word "*Afterward*"—another allusion to death and afterlife. "*We'll float between two words*," the phrase continues. What is going on here? These words suggest not only that the two of them will be together as a couple but also that they, after death, will be neither here nor there. Does this mean that they will be neither alive nor dead? Or does it imply that they believe in some kind of an after-death journey that would take them from one world of the living to another world of the dead? The poem indicates that they believe in a kind of netherworld, that they will float between these two places—the beginning of their journey and the final resting place. With this in mind, the image conjures up a sort of way station. Although they might no longer maintain a physical presence on earth, neither will they be able to continue on their way. It sounds as if the speaker and the person who has died believe that they will wait before finding out their final destination, or at least this is what the speaker and this unnamed person had, at one time, discussed.

With this information in hand, readers can go back to the earlier mention of waiting, as in waiting for time to pass: "to wait / for the whisker on the face of the clock / to twitch again." Maybe this is the clue that was meant to shed light on the concept of "practice." Could the practice the poet has mentioned refer to waiting? The speaker waits for time to pass after the death of her friend, just as this friend had told her that they would wait ("*float between two worlds*") until everyone they loved was safe. Could the poet be trying to find solace in her enforced period of waiting by thinking of what this friend had told her? In reflecting on her present, heavy emotional state, is she attempting to rise above her situation by considering her need to discipline her sorrow as practice for the unavoidable time of her own death?

At this point in the poem, the speaker takes a distinct break not only in her thoughts but also in the poem, using dashes in the writing to break the flow, much as she might have broken the flow of her tears, temporarily forgetting her mourning. She appears to be drawn out of her sorrow, at least momentarily, by an image she sees. The "five bronze beetles" that she notices impress her. She remembers the words of her friend—that they would float together; it is possible that the speaker is briefly filled with hope of their reunion. Maybe her eyes are momentarily cleared so that she is not focused on her loss or on her longing, and she sees something that in some way amuses her. There is a chance that she suddenly remembers another belief, one that restores her hope. The poem suggests that the speaker believes in reincarnation, that death is not a final destination but rather a way station. She might one day return after death, embodied as a bird. This belief appears to lift her spirits so that she makes a mental note of the beetles "drugged by lust." The beetles are feasting in a peony, and if the speaker returns after death as a bird, she wants to remember this image because the beetles will make a tasty meal. This seems to provide her with a more pleasant view of death. Perhaps death is not the end of everything. Maybe she will be reunited with her friend who had passed away and with those she has loved in this lifetime; perhaps she will come back once again to enjoy a new life on earth.

None of the clues in this poem are definite. After all, poetry is not akin to science. In reading poetry, speculation is required on the part of the reader. But, then, that is one element that makes reading poetry not only enjoyable but also enlightening. As readers contemplate the words and phrases of this poem, they measure the meaning, or the hints of meaning, against their own beliefs. Thus, the poem provides not merely a window into the soul of the poet but also insight into the reader's mind, the reader's beliefs, and the reader's emotional stance on the poem's themes and images.

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

Topics for Further Study

Read □Practice□ and try to imagine that you are the speaker. Consider each line as if it expresses your feelings. To whom are you speaking, and what is the nature of your relationship with that person? How long have you been grieving, and were you prepared for the loss? Once you have emotional insight into the speaker, compose a companion poem written by the speaker a year later. How have your feelings and perspectives changed? How have they stayed the same? Although you may choose to write the poem longer or shorter, more or less abstractly, or in a slightly different form, keep in mind that you are writing in the voice of the same speaker, so there should be cohesiveness between the two works.

Choose an art medium and style that appeals to you, and create an art piece that represents the image of the beetles and the peony. Try to make your artwork reflect the speaker's feelings about the image. Provide a title or a caption for your finished work.

Find two other poems (by other poets) that express or comment on grief. Create a lesson plan using these poems along with □Practice□ to teach about the theme of grief and its many expressions in poetry. Be sure to point out the differences and similarities between the selections.

The speaker initially turns her attention to a clock. What are the psychological relationships between time and strong emotions? Find out what psychologists or therapists have to say on the subject and write a short report. When you are done, discuss the new insights you have gained into the poem and the speaker.

Voigt often uses images from nature to teach a lesson or to express a feeling in her poetry. Choose a poem from either *Claiming Kin* or *The Forces of Plenty* (her first two books) in which Voigt uses an image from nature. Compare and contrast the way she uses nature in your chosen poem with her method in □Practice□ to see how a single poet can use nature in similar and different ways. Take what you learn and prepare a brief lecture and a writing exercise to help teach high school students about poetry.

The speaker refers to differing beliefs concerning the afterlife and its relationship to this world (lines 8-11 and line 15). Research four different religions or philosophies to see what they say about the afterlife and whether those who have died interact with the mortal world. Present your findings in a display that includes Voigt's poem, with the relevant lines from the poem highlighted. Prepare a presentation discussing these differing beliefs on the afterlife, noting which of the four religions or philosophies you studied most closely matches, in your opinion, what is professed in Voigt's poem.

What Do I Read Next?

The November 24, 1999, issue of *Atlantic Unbound* contains "Song and Story: An Interview with Ellen Bryant Voigt." In this interview, Voigt answers Steven Kramer's questions about her work in general and speaks at length about her book *Kyrie* and the orchestral piece "Voices of 1918," which was based on the book. Voigt's experiences as a concert pianist and as a poet bring to light her views on art in general.

Voigt's *Claiming Kin* (1976) is her first collection of poetry. Praised by readers and critics, this collection established Voigt as a promising new poet and opened doors to new opportunities for her.

In *The Flexible Lyric (The Life of Poetry)* (1999), Voigt shares her insights and views on the craft of poetry. Voigt wrote these essays based on her involvement in writing programs for new writers and following her publication of five volumes of poetry.

Poems of Mourning (1998), edited by Peter Washington and part of the Everyman's Library, is a collection of poems that consider the experience of grief. The poetry included is by such well-known writers as Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, A. E. Housman, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. While there is no commentary provided for individual poems, readers will come away with a strong sense of the expression of grief in poetry, across time and literary movements.

Further Study

Barge, Laura, "Changing Forms of Pastoral Poetry in Southern Poetry," in *Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Fall 1993, pp. 30-42.

Barge reviews the work of past and contemporary southern writers and their presentation of pastoral themes and images. In addition to discussing one of Voigt's poems, Barge looks at the work of John Crowe Ransom, Alice Walker, and other poets.

Farrell, Kate, ed., *Art and Nature: An Illustrated Anthology of Nature Poetry*, Bulfinch, 1992.

The use of nature in poetry is a longstanding tradition, and this book brings another dimension to that tradition by pairing 186 poems with artwork from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Although this book does not contain Voigt's work, it is a good visual tool for understanding the richness of nature in poetry.

Orr, Gregory, and Ellen Bryant Voigt, eds., *Poets Teaching Poets: Self and the World*, University of Michigan Press, 1996.

This book contains essays written by lecturers at the respected Warren Wilson Master of Fine Arts program in writing, which was established by Voigt. These essays draw heavily on the history and traditions of poetry and on the great poets of the past to offer guidance for poets seeking to hone their craft.

Yeatts, Todd McGregor, *Danville*, Arcadia Publishing, 2005.

More than 200 photographs complement this book, which relates the history and charms of Danville, Virginia—Voigt's hometown—and explains how it has changed over the years. Yeatts also considers what the future may hold for this town, whose popularity is growing.

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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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