# Reactionary Essay on Applied Science Study Guide

## Reactionary Essay on Applied Science by Phyllis McGinley

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# Introduction

"Reactionary Essay on Applied Science," with its blend of light domestic humor and social satire, is characteristic of much of McGinley's best poetry. First published in the *New Yorker* in 1951, it was included that same year in *A Short Walk from the Station,* as well as in *Times Three,* the 1961 Pulitzer Prize-winning volume of poetry which spanned three decades of her work. Many of McGinley's poems were based on her experiences as a suburban housewife and mother. She used this perspective, one frequently scorned by more serious writers, to comment on the ironies she found in the world around her. In this poem, she presents a "reactionary" view of the world of inventions. The poem satirically compares several minor discoveries which have practical importance in the speaker's life, such as the safety match, paper towels, and window screens, with highly praised inventions and inventors such as the Wright Brothers with their airplane and Eli Whitney and his cotton gin.

Like most writers of light verse, McGinley uses both complex rhythm and rhyme with technical virtuosity. Her language is clever and witty; in fact, she is sometimes compared to Dorothy Parker for her sophisticated use of humor. However, McGinley never employs Parker's caustic, at times bitter, overtones. Underlying even her most serious social criticism is an optimistic thread.

McGinley's work is accessible to a large and varied audience because her subjects and themes revolve around ordinary domestic life. In a 1965 interview in *Time* magazine, McGinley noted , "At a time when poetry has become the property of the universities and not the common people, I have a vast number of people who have become my readers. I have kept the door open and perhaps led them to greater poetry."

# Author Biography

McGinley was born on March 21, 1905 in Ontario, Oregon, but moved to a ranch near Iliff, Colorado, when she was only three months old. Her father, David McGinley, speculated in real estate, usually unsuccessfully, which caused the family to move frequently. She didn't enjoy her early childhood on the ranch where she and her brother felt isolated and friendless. After her father's death in 1917, her mother, Julia Keisel McGinley, took the two children back to her home in Ogden, Utah, where they moved in with Julia's sister. McGinley liked this stable new environment where she felt secure, enjoying for the first time the sense of having a permanent home.

McGinley attended the University of Utah. After graduation, she taught school, first in Utah and then in New Rochelle, New York. Soon she began submitting poetry to magazines; this early material was serious and romantic. McGinley compared her style to that of the pre-Raphealite poet, Charles Algernon Swinburne. At the urging of an editor at the *New Yorker,* however, she turned to light verse, which had the advantage of paying more than serious poetry. When the principal of the New Rochelle high school where she was teaching learned that her work was being published, he criticized her moonlighting. She decided to quit her job and move to New York City where she began working at an advertising agency. A few months later, she became poetry editor of *Town and Country* magazine, a job which gave her time to write.

In 1934, she met Bill Hayden, a Bell Telephone employee who was also a jazz musician. Since McGinley wanted a regular domestic life, she worried that his musical background would involve too wild a lifestyle. However, when he surprised her by having their wedding banns announced at church, she agreed to marry him. The couple moved to Larchmont, a New York City suburb. McGinley adapted easily to her role as a housewife and mother. When the first of her two daughters was born in 1939, she described herself as euphoric. She enjoyed almost every aspect of her life and the world around her. At the same time, she continued submitting poetry to a wide range of magazines. The domestic bliss and woes of her life were translated into verse. Some of her finest and most serious poetry deals with the relationships between mothers and daughters: the stages of their growth, the difficulty of letting go, and learning to cope once they are gone.

During the 1960s, McGinley took on the role of defending the joys of domesticity against feminists such as Betty Friedan, whose *The Feminine Mystique* labeled the role of housewife dangerous, stagnating, even a type of mental illness. McGinley 's 1964 collection of essays, *Sixpence in Her Shoe,* was written in part as a rebuttal to attacks on the role of woman as homemaker. When she was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1965, the caption across the cover quoted, "I rise to defend the quite possible She."

That same year, McGinley was invited to read at the White House Festival of the Arts. Throughout her life, McGinley received many honors, including the Edna St. Vincent Millay Prize for poetry. She was also a member of the National Institute of Arts and

Letters. In addition to poetry, McGinley also wrote very successful children's stories. Her last work was a collection of essays humanizing the saints. After her husband died in 1972, McGinley moved to an apartment in New York City. She died in 1978.

# Poem Text

I cannot love the Brothers Wright,

Marconi wins my mixed devotion.

Had no one yet discovered flight

Or set the air waves in commotion,

Life would, I think, have been as well.

That also goes for A. G. Bell.

What I'm really thankful for, when I'm cleaning up

after lunch,

Is the invention of waxed paper.

That Edison improved my lot,

I sometimes doubt; nor care a jitney

Whether the kettle steamed, or Watt,

Or if the gin invented Whitney.

Butter the world, I often feel,

Had nobody contrived the wheel.

On the other hand, I'm awfully indebted

To whoever it was dreamed up the elastic band.

Yes, Pausing grateful, now and then,

upon my prim, domestic courses,

I offer praise to lesser men□

Fultons unsung, anonymous Morses□

Whose deft and innocent devices

Pleasure my house with sweets and spices.

I give you, for instance, the fellow

Who first had the idea for Scotch Tape.

I hail the man who thought of soap,

The chap responsible for zippers,

Sun lotion, the stamped envelope,

And screens, and wading pools for nippers,

Venetian blinds of various classes,

and bobby pins and tinted glasses.

DeForest never thought up anything

So useful as a bobby pin.

Those baubles are the ones that keep

Their places, and beget no trouble

Incite no battles, stab no sleep,

Reduce no villages to rubble,

Being primarily designed

By men of unambitious mind.

You remember how Orville Wright said his flying

machine

Was going to outlaw war?

Let them on Archimedes dote

Who like to hear the planet rattling

I cannot cast a hearty vote

For Galileo or for Gatling,

Preferring, of the Freaks of science,

The pygmies rather than the giants□

(And from experience being wary of

Greek geniuses bearing gifts)

Deciding, on reflection calm,

mankind is better of with trifles:

With Band-Aid rather than the bomb,

With safety match than safety rifles.

Let the earth fall or the earth spin!

A brave new world might well begin

With no invention

Worth the mention

Save paper towels and aspirin.

Remind me to call the repairman

About my big, new, automatically defrosting

refrigerator with the built-in electric eye.

# Plot Summary

## Lines 1-4:

The poem begins with a sextet introducing an ironic critique of modern technology, the "applied science" of the title. The speaker declines to join in the widespread praise of major scientific advances. The first four lines are balanced; one and three refer to the Wright brothers and their airplane, while two and four refer to Guglielmo Marconi, the inventor who sent the first transatlantic wireless signals. The poem's description of his accomplishment as setting "the air waves in commotion" illustrates both McGinley's brand of humor and the speaker's attitude. While a commotion isn't a catastrophic event, the statement pictures air waves crowded with a jumble of discordant sounds. Clearly, peaceful and undisturbed air would be more pleasant.

Although the poem uses the first person, a speaker who like the author appears to be a suburban housewife, McGinley adopts this persona to present a satiric view of the modern world. At times during the poem, McGinley even encourages the reader to view the speaker, as well as the subject, with humor.

## Lines 5-6:

Each sextet, except the final one, ends with a couplet. Here Alexander Graham Bell and his telephone join the Wrights and Marconi on the poem's list of dubious achievers. The fifth line sums up the poem's main idea: the world would do just as well without the tinkering of these men.

## Lines 7-8:

Much of the poem's charm and humor comes in the use of conversational asides between each stanza. This is a technique McGinley has used in several poems. The chatty, informal tone introduces the type of invention the speaker finds truly useful: waxed paper, which was popularly used during the 1950s for wrapping up leftovers.

## Lines 9-12:

This segment illustrates both the poem's wit and one of its weaknesses. Writers of light verse have often been accused of sacrificing meaning to the poem's rhyme scheme or rhythm. The use of jitney in line ten is an example. A jitney is a small bus or informal type of transportation. Its main role in the poem is to rhyme with Whitney; the word's meaning is irrelevant. However, the rhythmic flow of these lines allows McGinley to indulge in some of the most clever wordplay in the poem. James Watt developed an improved steam engine. McGinley connects the steam engine with a steam kettle, states her indifference to it, and then creates a play on Watt's name, using "or Watt"

instead of "or what." The fact that watt is also a measurement of energy only adds to the complex wordplay. Line twelve continues this. Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, a machine which cleans and removes the seeds from cotton. McGinley inverts the idea, allowing the reader to consider another meaning of gin, as an alcoholic beverage. The machine, of course, did not create the inventor, but what (or watt) role might gin, the drink, have had in aiding Whitney's creativity.

## Lines 13-14:

The couplet sums up the meaning once again, suggesting that even the wheel might have been a mistake.

***Lines 15-16:***

This aside praises the unknown inventor of the rubber band. Notice the use of casual, even cliched, transitional phrases such as "on the other hand" to introduce several of the asides. This helps to quickly establish the break in rhythm and mood which marks the switch from the formal poetic pattern to the conversational line.

## Lines 17-18:

These lines create a portrait of the speaker, which in itself is slightly mocking, with the description of "prim, domestic courses."

***Lines 19-22:***

The speaker's heroes produce practical inventions designed to make daily life more pleasurable. There is an implied contrast between their "innocent devices" and the potentially more dangerous or disturbing ones of the previously mentioned famous inventors.

## Lines 23-24:

The break leads into the next stanza, which contains a list of the type of the inventions the speaker admires.

## Lines 25-30:

The use of a list or catalogue of items is another technique McGinley often uses in her poems. This stanza enumerates admirable inventions. It is made entertaining, however, through the interesting word choices. Hail, usually a formal or impressive term, is paired with soap. Line 26 blends three similarly disparate words: chap, responsible, and zippers. Venetian blinds, which are simply window blinds, are given varying degrees of

social status. While the reader is unlikely to analyze this use of language, it contributes to the poem's ironic tone.

Alliteration, the use of words which begin with the same letter, contributes to the flowing rhythm: deft and devices, sweets and spices, prim and praise. Pausing in the first line and pleasure in the last bracket the sextet.

## Lines 31-32:

Lee DeForest, a pioneer in electronics, created a vacuum tube which was essential to the development of radio and television. He also helped set up the United States Naval communication system.

## Lines 33-38:

Until this stanza, the speaker merely expressed her own preference for minor inventions. Now the dangerous quality of major inventions, which was first implied by contrast in line 21, is specifically demonstrated. Domestic inventions improve the world. However, many major inventions are altered for use in war; several have enormous potential for destruction. Here alliteration is used for emphasis in phrases such as "stab no sleep", and "reduce ... to rubble."

## Lines 39-40:

The irony in this aside fully develops the point of the last stanza. Even though Orville Wright had noble goals for the airplane, World War II demonstrated how impossible his dream proved to be. Instead of outlawing war, the airplane enabled armies to destroy entire cities, becoming weapons of mass destruction.

## Lines 41-44:

This stanza contrasts the values and attitudes of those who hold the traditional views on scientific accomplishments with those of the speaker. Praise for Archimedes the mathematician is also praise for the inventor of some of the most ingenious weapons of destruction of his period, the Second Punic War. Richard Gatling, the inventor of the Gatling Gun, a forerunner of the modern machine gun, will never receive the speaker's approval.

## Lines 45-46:

The couplet harshly labels the developers of applied science as freaks. Use of the capital letter emphasizes this judgment.

## Lines 47-48:

The use of the parentheses gives these lines an additional level of distance from the formal sextets. The topic both refers back to Archimedes, the Greek genius, and reminds the reader of the story of the Trojan Horse from Homer's *Iliad.* The Greeks, pretending to retreat from Troy, left behind a gift of peace, a large wooden horse. After the people of Troy brought the peace offering into their city, they went to sleep, only to discover that it was filled with Greek soldiers. Troy was destroyed. The aside hints that when modern society welcomes these fantastic inventions, devastation may be a hidden consequence.

## Lines 49-52:

The sextet form is abandoned for a concluding nine-line stanza. These lines again restate the poem's theme. Man is better off with simple, practical domestic inventions. McGinley again uses alliteration to emphasize the contrasts in lines 51 and 52.

## Lines 53-57:

The speaker predicts how a better world might develop with only minor innovations on hand. The reference to "a brave new world" is designed to remind the reader of Aldous Huxley's 1931 novel, *Brave New World,* which presents a futuristic society where technology has created a nightmare world.

## Lines 58-59:

The final lines provide another slightly mocking view of the speaker who is, after all, primarily concerned with her marvelous new appliances.

# Themes

## The Dangers of Modern Technology

"Reactionary Essay on Applied Science" contrasts the benefits of minor domestic inventions with the major scientific accomplishments of famous inventors. Even though the work is lightly humorous, the underlying satire contains a serious premise: many so-called technological advances are in fact dangerous and destructive.

McGinley uses contrast throughout the poem to illustrate her thesis. Many of the asides, as well as the third and fourth stanzas, focus on inventions by "unsung" creators. These are small innovations which serve a single positive purpose. Yet these small purposes can collectively make daily life easier. Imagine a world without soap, window screens, and zippers. However, the poem's theme notes that the most important quality of these inventions may be something other than their ability to make life more pleasant and convenient. What is truly relevant is that they cannot be put to destructive ends. In spite of the Biblical tale of David who killed Goliath with a type of slingshot, the elastic band is unlikely to plunge the world, or even the neighborhood, into war.

The other stanzas present those troublesome inventions which make the speaker uneasy. McGinley carefully selects incidents to build her case. The use of the Wright brothers in both the first stanza and in the fifth aside perfectly illustrates the theme. The airplane seemed miraculous when it was first invented. In fact, Orville Wright thought that it could perform a true miracle, the establishment of world peace. However, in a few years, the airplane was converted all too easily into a weapon of mass destruction. Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, Dresden, Nagasaki: all provide testimony to this fact. Many other inventions also have their destructive side. While modern methods of communication may, at first, seem only beneficial, advanced communication systems have been turned to sophisticated military purposes.

McGinley uses historical references to illustrate the fact that the potential for destruction has often accompanied lofty scientific thought. Archimedes, the most brilliant mathematician of his age, invented the catapult and several other devices of war, including a devastating burning mirror. Some of Galileo's discoveries underlie the science of ballistics.

The title of the poem implies that its viewpoint runs counter to most popular opinion. However, McGinley's perceptions are shared by several other writers. In his introduction to *Times Three,* W. H. Auden prefaced a quotation from the poem with the statement that "ten minutes with a newspaper leave me with the conviction that the human race has little chance of survival unless men are disenfranchised and debarred from political life: in a technological age, only women have the sense to know which toys are dangerous." As early as 1931, Aldous Huxley envisioned a *Brave New World* where technology and medical research had eradicated love, home and family, and man existed only to serve machine rather than the opposite. Interestingly, in this society, time

was measured A.F., or after Henry Ford. McGinley's reference to this work in her poem helps to underline the distinction she makes between the pygmies of modern science whose products make daily life more convenient and the giants whose inventions contain ominous potential.

## Woman's Role in the Home

A major theme in McGinley's work revolves around the differences between male and female attitudes and activities. It is important to remember that she is writing about a separation in roles which was considered natural by a large segment of society during the first half of the twentieth century. While such a strict division may seem unacceptable to a modern reader, during the 1950s, when "Reactionary Essay on Applied Science" was written, the traditional woman's role was in the home. W. H. Auden described McGinley's art as innately feminine: "What, in fact, distinguishes Phyllis McGinley's poems from those of most light verse poets is that no man could have written them.... She speaks up bravely for her sex." This comment was intended both as a valid critical comment and a statement of praise.

In fact, McGinley does present the values of the housewife of the 1940s and 1950s. An underlying issue in the poem stresses the importance of the women's role in creating a healthy, happy environment for her family. The speaker's concerns are centered around the home. What occupies her is cleaning up after lunch and making sure the children can play in the wading pool, safe from sunburn thanks to the invention of sun lotion. Although there is a hint of humor in McGinley's portrayal of the speaker, there is no mockery of either the person or the role. This contrast between the nurturing quality of the speaker and the destructive ethos of modern science is clear.

It is important to note that the poem never suggests that being a housewife is limiting. Clearly the speaker is extremely well-educated and intelligent. In fact, McGinley was in favor of a liberal arts education for all women, since she believed that this education could be put to good use in the home. She made this point clearly in her 1965 interview in *Time* magazine: "We who belong to the profession of housewife hold the fate of the world in our hands. It is our influence which will determine the culture of coming generations. We are the people who chiefly listen to the music, buy the books, attend the theater, prowl the art galleries, collect for charities, brood over the schools, converse with the children. Our minds need to be rich and flexible for those duties."

# Style

A major characteristic of light verse is the use of regular rhyme and rhythm, although the pattern may be broken or exaggerated in places for emphasis or humorous effect. This is true of "Reactionary Essay on Applied Science." The verses are sextets, which means they contain six lines each. This pattern is altered by the use of conversational lines between the stanzas. These are not lines of verse. Instead McGinley adopts a casual tone which sounds as if she is interrupting the poem in order to address the reader personally. Part of the humor in the poem comes from the contrast between these two styles. The final stanza also varies the pattern since it runs nine lines long.

The verses are written in iambic tetrameter. Iambic means that the lines are broken into two syllable units; the first syllable is unstressed, the second stressed. Tetrameter indicates that each line contains four of these units. Even though the second and fourth lines frequently contain nine syllables, the poem may still be described as iambic tetrameter because only four of the syllables are stressed. This usually occurs in the poem because McGinley ends the nine-syllable lines with a feminine rhyme: two rhyming syllables where one is stressed and other unstressed, courses and Morses, jitney and Whitney, for example.

Another technique McGinley uses is the list or catalogue. However, her lists are never simple compilations. Through careful use of clever word combinations, striking adjectives, and assonance and alliteration, these rosters help to develop the poem's humor and theme. In "Reactionary Essay on Applied Science," McGinley develops her theme through the use of two contrasting catalogues of inventions.

# Historical Context

During the middle years of the twentieth century, the "American Dream" for many people became a dream of suburbia. This consisted of many components, including safe tree-lined streets filled with privately-owned single family homes, often surrounded by white picket fences. This area retained enough characteristics of the countryside to allow children to roam freely in constructive and healthy play. Convenient transportation took Dad to work, while Mom stayed home and baked cookies. The dream had a strong materialistic component. Maintenance of the ideal was expensive and required cars, swimming pools, and a wide range of household and garden machinery, such as the frost-free refrigerator of "Reactionary Essay." McGinley was, in many ways, an advocate of the suburban lifestyle, defending it in prose and poetry, as well as in her own personal life.

The idea of the suburb, a community centered around an urban center, was certainly not unique to the twentieth century. Both ancient Greece and Rome had areas that could be considered suburbs. Several scholars trace more recent suburban development to seventeenth century London where the plague of 1665 and the great fire of 1666 forced large numbers of the populace to settle in tracts surrounding the central city. The Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, created a new impetus to develop communities outside the central core of cities. When workers abandoned their farms and flocked to the manufacturing centers, the population of urban areas throughout Europe and North America grew dramatically. In 1850, New York City's population was under 700,000. By the turn of the century it had grown to over 3,000,000. This enormous growth created many problems. The number of people seeking work in the cities caused living conditions to deteriorate. Slums grew up across the industrialized world: in New York, London, Chicago, Brussels, and Manchester. Living conditions were often appalling, with six to ten people frequently sharing a single, small, dark room with no access to clean water. Noise, filth, and crime proliferated.

Partly because of these conditions, which affected both wealthy and impoverished urban dwellers to varying degrees, several nineteenth century writers created a romanticized view of a suburban ideal, far from the noise and confusion of the city. One of the most prominent was Catherine Beecher, the sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the celebrated antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Beecher published several books on domestic life. In her opinion, the home should be a place of security and nurturing. Therefore, the location of the household became extremely important. A suburban lifestyle would provide an environment where the wife and mother could reign, free from the harmful influences of city life.

Frederick Law Olmstead, the creator of New York City's Central Park, developed sixteen suburban areas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. His goal was to combine the advantages of town life with the joys of a rural wilderness. His planned communities were refuges for the affluent middle and upper classes who were now moving to exclusive suburbs across the country. In time, however, suburbs were also

designed for workers as well. Industrialists such as Henry Ford helped to develop suburban areas to house their employees. However, all of these communities tended to be homogenous, very much segregated by class, ethnicity, and race.

Developing working-class suburbs was not Ford's only contribution to the growth of outlying areas. The widespread ownership of automobiles helped to create a suburban explosion during the 1920s. The years after the first world war were the first "boom" period for the suburbs. This was in large part due to the fact that developments in technology and transit allowed middle-class suburban dwellers to genuinely have the best that both city and countryside had to offer. Transportation became quick and inexpensive, eliminating the long, cumbersome commutes of the past. A suburban area was able to tap into the nearby city's utilities. However, since suburbs were setting up their own government and school systems, they were able to avoid some of the heavy tax burdens associated with urban areas. Several suburbs of this period bore a strong resemblance to the romanticized ideal espoused by Beecher in the nineteenth century, and then later adopted by many women's magazines in the 1920s and 1930s.

The Depression brought an end to the development of these communities. However, several initiatives established by the Roosevelt administration to combat poverty had a significant impact on future growth. The Federal Housing Authority (FHA) and the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) helped many working-class families obtain homes.

After World War II, the stream of movement to areas outside the cities became a torrent. Soldiers returning from war were desperate for housing. Developers began creating suburban communities to answer their needs. The most famous of these developers were the Levitt brothers who applied the principles of the assembly line to setting up neighborhoods. Since each member of the crew performed only one task, production moved quickly. A single crew could set up as many as 150 houses in a single week. These were not the gracious, carefully designed homes of many early communities. They were tract homes, all looking very much alike, laid out in uniform rows, rather than winding streets. However, they quickly answered a desperate need.

The prosperity that came after the war helped to bring a middle-class lifestyle to most suburban areas. McGinley's world of deft devices and many pleasures was fairly widespread. During the 1950s, popular magazines such as *Life, Time,* and *The Saturday Evening Post* joined politicians and civic leaders in proclaiming that millions had truly attained the American Dream. Voices of criticism against this new lifestyle were muted. However, the period of grace would only last a few years. By the end of the decade, suburbia and its values were under attack by intellectuals and sociologists. The pleasant world was now called shallow, mindless, and spiritually deadening.

# Critical Overview

During her lifetime, McGinley received great popular acclaim, being one of the few poets in the twentieth century to find a place on the *New York Times* best-seller list. She also received the praise of many contemporary poets, such as W. H. Auden, who wrote the introduction to *Times Three.* During the last decades of the twentieth century, however, McGinley's work has received little attention although she is still included in several anthologies. This is in part because light verse has traditionally failed to receive serious critical analysis. In addition, humorous verse is no longer as popular with readers as it was during the first half of the century. Finally, because much of McGinley's humor is topical, many specific details in her work are dated. This is true even in "Reactionary Essay on Applied Science."

Linda Welshimer Wagner's *Phyllis McGinley* is the only book-length study on the poet. Wagner emphasizes McGinley's mastery of poetic techniques, emphasizing her skill and dedication to her craft. This technical excellence enabled McGinley to experiment with innovative forms with effective and striking results. Wagner mentions the use of the conversational lines in "Reactionary Essay on Applied Science" as a successful example of such experimentation. Wagner also describes the characteristics of light verse, categorizing it into four levels, with one being the simplest and four the most thematically complex. She then compares some of McGinley's Level IV poems with other contemporary writers such as Denise Levertov.

In his article, "The Poetry of Phyllis McGinley," Louis Hasley also discusses the variety and complexity of McGinley's style. He analyzed several sections of *Times Three* in order to demonstrate the different verse patterns in her work. The article includes a set of standards for judging light verse; these help to indicate the range of McGinley's artistry. Hasley believes that her work has more in common with the wit and style of the Cavalier poets of seventeenth century England than with her contemporaries.

In "The Light Touch," Bette Richart is slightly more critical in her evaluation of McGinley's poetry. Although she admires the technical virtuosity of the poems, she is at times critical of McGinley's tone and subject matter, finding her work coy or immature in places. Richart is not totally comfortable with the addition of suburbia to the topics for light verse, believing that the subject matter helps to create an attitude of complacency. Richart finds this weakness in striking contrast with the brilliant, philosophical artistry of several works dealing with age and youth, including poems such as "The Doll-house," which she would rank far above the finest light verse.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

# Critical Essay #1

*Chris Semansky's poems, essays, and criticism appear regularly in literary journals and magazines. In the following essay, Semansky explores the relationship between gender and technology in Phyllis McGinley's poem "Reactionary Essay on Applied Science."*

W. H. Auden said that when Phyllis McGinley was confronted by things and people who did not please her, she did not□like other satirists□ show shock or temper, but merely observed the case with deadly accuracy. McGinley's "Reactionary Essay on Applied Science" takes its initial power from this dispassionate view.  It examines the nature of invention and its dubious assistance in increasing human health and happiness. The poem is an adulterated sextilla, juxtaposing stanzas written in this poetic form with single lines of free verse, as if the speaker is interrupting her own highly organized attack against "progressive" inventions with stage-whispered asides. This breached form carries the poet's meaning clearly: the "reactionary" free verse is set against the traditional rhymed stanzas in the same way that the speaker in the poem uses her defaming criticism against the traditional and esteemed positions of the inventors.

The first stanzas of the poem establish these oppositional forces, pitting derisive commentary about discoveries the speaker could have done without against the more domestic, less glittery innovations for which she is thankful. Accordingly, she tells us that the Wright Brothers can keep their airplane and Marconi his wireless telegraphy, but the waxed paper with which she covers leftovers at lunch is a hugely useful tool for which she feels real gratitude. Likewise, neither Edison's light bulb nor Whitney's cotton gin leave her even vaguely impressed, but she calls herself "awfully indebted to whoever it was dreamed up the elastic band." While the speaker does not explicitly draw our attention to the fact, the inventors about whom she gripes are all men, and her appreciation of simple domestic inventions is a female slap in the face to their "planet rattling" but ultimately painfully uncontrollable discoveries.

From the start, the speaker situates herself firmly outside the quest for technological progress, telling us that she pauses, "now and then / upon my prim, domestic courses," to "offer praise to lesser men." Among those men she wishes to offer praise to are the inventors of such homely devices as soap, zippers, sun lotion, tinted glasses, and Venetian blinds. It is notable, however, that the speaker does not mention the names of the inventors of these varied apparatuses she claims to praise, while she is careful to attach the names of more consequential inventors firmly to their creations. This fact leads the reader to a tension within the poem: although the speaker declares herself unmoved and unimpressed by the milestones of supposed progress, she nevertheless cannot completely separate herself from the momentous nature of those forces. Galileo's revered name is uttered so that he can be renounced, but the inventor of the bobby pin languishes in neglectful anonymity from the start. Notable, as well, is the utter absence of women inventors. The only female presence in the poem is the speaker herself. But she attempts to critique the technological world even while it encompasses her, despite her apparent understanding that her protestations against masculine ideas of progress cannot hope to have any effect. Like the poems of Dorothy Parker,

McGinley's poem relies on the acerbic wit of a female speaker gazing at the world with perfect vision as she is pulled under by the greater strength of contrary opinion.

In the fifth rhymed stanza the speaker gives her reasons for rejecting what the world at large seems to applaud, noting that the simple, practical devices good for everyday household use "beget no trouble / Incite no battles, stab no sleep / Reduce no villages to rubble." It is at this point in the poem that we can see that the speaker is troubled more by the consequences of invention than by the inventions themselves. Where does it all lead? she seems to ask, and cites Orville Wright's perplexing claim that his flying machine was going to outlaw war. She charges the reader with the question, asking, by this particular, if we can bear to remember the innocent, hopeful claims which accompany every new discovery, no matter what destruction or pandemonium ensues from them. The old-fashioned term "flying-machine" underscores the changes in form a given invention makes (from the short, exciting first lifts away from gravity to skies crossed by swarms of planes bombing cities beneath them) as well as reminding us that our innocently spoken-of machines, while harmless at their inception, "fly" out of our control with some consistency.

By the sixth rhymed stanza, the speaker moves into an offensive against all who show ambition, and states her preference for "the pygmies rather than the giants," bringing the division she set about making in the beginning stanzas to its highest pitch. Through the surface we can see the poet's suggestion that this division also stand for the one that exists between inhabitors of the traditionally female domestic world, and those in the masculine world, who are cast here as being in perpetual revolt against imagined deprivations that they redress with disastrous and monstrous inventions. That the word "pygmies" is used to connote the gentler, more female approach to life, and "giants" connoting those who act upon life, rather than bear its consequences□is in keeping with the general tone of the poem to this point. The speaker, handicapped by both her sex and her practical turn of mind, must learn to get by the best she can in a world in which she does not feel she fits, and in which she is surrounded by "giants" and those who revere them: the inventors and their supporters, who enjoy appreciable practical advantages over the pygmies.

In the seventh rhymed stanza, McGinley alludes to Huxley's *Brave New World:* "Let the earth fall or the earth spin! / A brave new world might well begin / with no invention / worth the mention / save paper towels and aspirin." The final word of this stanza, "aspirin," is a slant or approximate rhyme, and its effect is to bring levity to this manifesto. At the same time that McGinley's poem concurs with Huxley's harrowing vision of a dystopic future in which the needs of human beings are subsumed by larger machinations of progress, it also laughs at the idea of any future capable of being salvaged by aspirin and paper towels.

This lightness at the end of this stanza is the turning point in the poem, for "Reactionary Essay on Applied Science" is not content, ultimately, to do no more than call sides in a gender war and advise, in cautionary whispers, against a way life that is already in existence. McGinley does not let the speaker in her poem rest in the position of elevated ethical and philosophical insight into which she has been placed. Although the

speaker's last breath comes at the reader in the form of lines of free verse "reacting" against the sextilla's scheme, the content of those lines dissolves the line between the safe and practical world of domesticity and the wider, wilder world of constant progress and invention: "Remind me to call the repairman / About my big, new, automatically defrosting refrigerator with the / built-in electric eye."

By the end of the poem the speaker is strangely bedded with those she has been judging, and the firm, practical ground of female sensibility has given way beneath her feet, dissolved not by a hunger to fly or bomb or re-imagine orbiting planets, but through the simple, pernicious belief that those inventions that pleased her most were somehow least harmful; were so innocuous, in fact, that their humble presence could never lead anyone astray. The speaker is revealed as having fallen down a slippery slope of convenience devices, from waxed paper to elastic bands to bobby pins, and finally to an automatically defrosting refrigerator. The refrigerator takes its place in her life by striking a simple bargain: it defrosts itself so she doesn't have to, but in return it gets to look out at her with its single eye. The eye, as the poem states, is not an optional device, but "built-in," and from this we can infer that the poem professes that each piece of technological change we let into our lives comes with its own "built-in" power over us. The speaker finishes by being as trapped by her addiction to homely, burden-relieving inventions as others have been to Gatling guns. In the end, only the machine is left to perceive, all others having given up their right to see with any clarity or wisdom. The speaker, who began by contextualizing and judging the world around her, has disappeared into that context irretrievably. And the gaze of the refrigerator's single eye looks out at the reader with the innocence of a cat who has just swallowed a canary.

**Source:** Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

# Topics for Further Study

Write your own reactionary poem or essay in which you challenge a popularly held opinion or attitude.

Over the centuries, many idealists dreamed of creating Utopias. Writers such as Aldous Huxley forewarned of dystopias. Report on the origins of both terms, and trace their development in society and literature.

Contrast the inventions you find indispensable with those you wish had never been created.

Working in a group, develop a set of criteria, a rubric, for judging contemporary satire. Then choose one such satire (an essay or editorial, a cartoon, a video of a standup comic), and evaluate it according to your standards.

*Media Adaptations*

McGinley's poems are included in Volumes 2 and 4 of *The Poetry Hall of Fame,* a 1993-94 release of the PBS series *Anyone for Tennyson* by Monterrey Home Video

In 1986, The Library of Congress produced an audio cassette *Nine Pulitzer Prize Poets Reading Their Own Poems*

Some of McGinley's work is heard in *A Quip with Yip and Friends,* a 1990 video released by Monterrey Home Video.

*The Year Without a Santa,* McGinley's popular Christmas tale was re-released in 1999 by Warner Studios.

# Compare and Contrast

**1951:** Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were sentenced to death for passing information about the nuclear bomb to the Soviet Union. Two years later, they were executed.

**1999:** Wen Ho Lee, a scientist at Los Alamos, was accused of giving the United States' nuclear secrets to the Chinese. Although both the press and the FBI drew comparisons between this case and that of the Rosenbergs, Wen Ho Lee has not been charged.

**1951:** Color television was made popularly available, and in June CBS began producing color broadcasts.

**1975:** Sony introduced the first practical VCR to the United States, radically expanding the role of television.

**1997:** DVD players reached the American market, providing cinematic viewing quality at home.

# What Do I Read Next?

McGinley's 1961 Pulitzer Prize winning collection of poetry, *Times Three,* demonstrates the wit, variety, and technical virtuosity of her poetry.

In *The Feminist Mystique,* Betty Friedan's groundbreaking 1963 feminist manifesto, she challenges the traditional view of the happy housewife as dangerous and dehumanizing, accusing successful women, including McGinley, of denying their roles as individuals.

McGinley's *Sixpence in Her Shoe* is a collection of essays defending the joys of domesticity and womanhood, written in part as a rebuttal to Friedan's book.

*This Fabulous Century, 1950-1960,* vividly conveys the culture, values, and personalities of the decades in words and pictures, including a segment on suburbia.

The 1979 anthology, *The Oxford Book of American Light Verse,* presents a wide range of humorous poems including works by such usually serious writers as T. S. Eliot and Tennessee Williams, as well as traditional humorists like McGinley.

*No More Masks: An Anthology of Poems by Women,* edited by Florence Howe and Ellen Bass in 1973, attempts to explore the range and uniqueness of women's voices ranging from a radical feminist perspective to the more traditional views of poets such as McGinley.

# Further Study


Allen, Everett S., *Famous American Humorous Poets,* New

York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1968.

The chapter on McGinley provides a good introduction to her work, including a biography, evaluation of McGinley's stature as a poet, and a discussion of her themes and style.

Doyle, Lewis, "The Poems of Phyllis McGinley," in *America,* December 18, 1954, pp. 320-322.

The article places McGinley in the tradition of such Celtic satirists as Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde, and G. B. Shaw.

Jackson, Kenneth T., *Crabgrass Frontier,* New York:Oxford University Press, 1985.

This is intriguing and very readable account of the

growth of suburban areas.

"Life with a Poet: The Lady from Larchmont," in *Newsweek,* September 26, 1960, pp. 120-122.

In this interview, McGinley discusses both her role

as a poet and as a public figure.

McCord, David, "She Speaks a Language of Delight," in

*Saturday Review,* December 9, 1960, p. 32.

McCord describes the cleverness of McGinley's poetic technique over the decades, noting both her unique voice and her models.

Sullivan, Kay. "From Suburbs to Saints: Phyllis McGinley," in *Catholic World,* September, 1957, pp. 420-425. This article is a source of rich biographical detail.

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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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