The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter Study Guide

The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter by Ezra Pound

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

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Poem Text....5

Plot Summary....7

Themes....9

Style....12

Historical Context....13

Critical Overview....15

Critical Essay #2....17

Adaptations....23

Topics for Further Study....24

Compare and Contrast....25

What Do I Read Next?....26

Further Study....27

Bibliography....28

Copyright Information....29

Introduction

" The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" was published in 1915 in Ezra Pound's third collection of poetry, *Cathay: Translations,* which contains versions of Chinese poems composed from the sixteen notebooks of Ernest Fenollosa, a scholar of Chinese literature. Pound called the poems in English which resulted from the Fenollosa manuscripts "translations," but as such they are held in contempt by most scholars of Chinese language and literature. However, they have been acclaimed as "poetry" for their clarity and elegance. They are variously referred to as "translations," "interpretations," "paraphrases," and "adaptations."

Pound's study of the Fenollosa manuscripts led to his preoccupation with the Chinese ideogram (a written symbol for an idea or object) as a medium for poetry. In fact, he realized that Chinese poets had long been aware of the image as the fundamental principle for poetic composition that he himself was beginning to formulate. Pound further maintained that the poetic image did not lose anything in translation between languages nor was it bound by time, but effectively communicated through time and across cultures, accruing meaning in the process. " The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," for example, communicates with depth and poignance the human experience of sorrow at separation, the human experience of love.

Working with the literary traditions of other cultures was typical not only of Pound, but of most of his contemporaries, who were not convinced that the only culture of value was European. However Pound's work has significance not only for its cross-cultural innovations, but for the "cross-chronological" breakthrough notion that the human response to the world links us all, so that an American in the twentieth century can share and learn from the human experience of an eighth century Chinese river-merchant's wife.

BOOKRAGS

Author Biography

Pound was born in Hailey, Idaho, in 1885, and raised in Philadelphia, the son of Homer Loomis Pound and Isabel Weston Pound. He made his first visits to Europe with his family in 1898 and 1902. He attended theCheltenhamMilitary Academy when he was twelve and soon after attended theCheltenham Township High School. Just before his sixteenth birthday Pound entered the University ofPennsylvania, and in 1903 he transferred toHamilton College, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1905. He taught Romance languages at Wabash College in Indiana for a short time in 1907, but was dismissed after a scandal involving a stranded actress that he allowed to stay overnight with him in his room. After this and a failed courtship with Mary S. Moore, Pound decided to leave for Europe, where he privately published his first volume of, poetry, *A lume spento,* in Venice in 1908. He then moved to London and by 1911 was immersed in the literary and intellectual milieu and was a respected critic and poet. Around this time Pound founded a poetic movement called Imagism, which linked techniques derived from the Symbolist movement and Oriental poetry, such as haiku.

Pound spent much of his time concerned with promoting the careers of many of the great writers of the time and was a key figure in the publication of many influential works, including Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time,* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land.* In 1921 Pound moved to Paris and from there to Rapallo, Italy, in 1924. In Italy Pound endorsed the Fascist government of Benito Mussolini and declared his political and anti-semitic beliefs in a series of radio broadcasts during World War II. After the war Pound was arrested by American allies and charged with treason. He was found mentally incapable to stand trial and was committed to St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington D.C. in 1946. Upon his release in 1958 he returned to Italy. He died in Venice in 1972 and is buried in SanMicheleCemetery on the island ofSan Giorgio Maggiore.

Poem Text

While my hair was still cut straight across my

forehead

I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.

You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,

You walked about my seat, playing with blue

plums.

And we went on living in the village ofChokan: 5

Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.

I never laughed, being bashful.

Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.

Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back. 10

At fifteen I stopped scowling,

I desired my dust to be mingled with yours

Forever and forever and forever.

Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed, 15

You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of

swirling eddies,

And you have been gone five months.

The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.

By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different 20

mosses,

Too deep to clear them away!

The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.

The paired butterflies are already yellow with

August

Over the grass in the West garden;

They hurt me. I grow older. 25

If you are coming down through the narrows of the 26

river Kiang,

Please let me know beforehand,

And I will come out to meet you

As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

BOOKRAGS

Plot Summary

Lines 1-6:

This opening stanza of 6 lines is organized around a central image of the river-merchant and his wife as a child, confirmed by the first component of the central image: the picture of a little girl with her hair cut in bangs. (The mark of an adult woman in the ancient Chinese culture was elaborate arrangements of uncut long hair.)

Each line contributes to a clearer understanding of the central image of the children. The repetition in three separate lines of the verb "playing" to describe the little girl's activity at the front gate, as well as the little boy's presence on stilts and his circling around where she sits, emphasizes the natural, contented activity of children□almost as a part of the natural world referred to here by "flowers" and "blue plums."

This stanza establishes the presence of the "I" and the "you" in the world of the poem.

Lines 7-10:

The second stanza places the girl and the boy, the "I" and the "you," as a woman and man in the adult world. In ancient cultures, and in some cultures today, early marriages are customary, and it is often also the custom for the wife to refer to her husband by a respectful title. In the case of this poem the formality of the title is softened by the direct address of "you" added right after it.

Lines 8-9 establish the child-wife's shyness in this formal adult situation by offering a picture of her bent head and averted eyes, a shyness so extreme that she could not respond to her husband, no matter how many efforts he made.

Lines 11-14:

The central image of this stanza is the growth of love between the young husband and wife. Her face, which in the first stanza has the bangs of childhood across her forehead, in the second stanza is averted and unsmiling, "stops scowling" in the third stanza.

The vows of the marriage ceremony, "till death us do part," are evoked in lines 12 and 13 and poignantly reinforced by the triple repetition in line 13 of "forever."

It is unclear whether "climb the lookout" in line 14 is a reference to a ritual performed in this culture by a wife after death, perhaps to look for other offers to marry that might come her way. If it is, it means that the wife as a widow does not want to do this. In any case, it is clear that there is nothing she wishes for after the death of her husband, so deep is her love for him now.

Lines 15-18:

An image of separation is developed in these lines as the husband takes on his role as a river-merchant and travels the waters, conducting his work in the world on a distant island.

The wife's statement of the length of his absence is expressed in one line, giving it full and emphatic force. And in line 18 the effect of this long absence is brought to full comprehension by the use of the natural image of the sounds of the monkeys that reflect back to her the sound of her own sorrow. The sounds that monkeys make are generally interpreted as chirping, happy sounds, but the weight of the wife's sorrow is so great that she can only hear the monkeys' noise as "sorrowful."

Lines 19-21:

The first three lines of this final 11-line stanza are centered on the image of the river-merchant's absence. Line 19 indicates that he was as averse to this separation as she was. In line 20 the phrase "by the gate" (perhaps the same gate they played about as children), indicates that she has returned to this gate and in her memory sees him reluctantly leaving again. For her it is the scene of the beginning of his absence. And evidently she knows this scene well: not only is there moss growing there, but she is aware that there are different kinds of mosses, which she has not cleared away since his departure. They are now too deep to clear away.

Lines 22-25:

In line 22 the sadness of the river-merchant's wife is again reflected back to her by the natural world, by the falling leaves and wind of autumn. This image becomes more defined with her observation of the butterflies in the garden, for they are "paired" as she is not, and they are becoming "yellow" changing with the season, growing older together.

The butterflies "hurt" her because they emphasize the pain of her realization that she is growing older, but alone, not with her husband.

Lines 26-29:

In these closing lines of the poem and the "letter" the river-merchant's wife reaches out from her lonely world of sorrow to her husband in a direct request: Please let me know when and by what route you are returning, so that I may come to meet you. This, however, conveys more than it would at first appear. Her village is a suburb of Nanking and she is willing to walk to a beach several hundred miles upstream from there to meet her husband, so deeply does she yearn to close the distance between them.

BOOKRAGS

Themes

Love and Passion

Ezra Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," a dramatic monologue written in the form of a letter, is a poignant plea from a wife to her husband, a merchant whose journey has lasted far too long for the wife's ease of mind. The poem honors constancy and faithfulness as the wife reflects on the development of their life together and expresses her growing sorrow as she anxiously awaits his return.

One important theme in the poem reveals the process through which the love between the man and woman develops. In the opening lines of the poem, the wife recalls her childhood when her husband was simply a playmate, a companion. The first line gives a vivid picture of the wife as a child. The use of the passive tense, making bangs the subject, helps create the world from a child's perspective, not actively involved in decisions about what to wear or how to look. This creates both a clear physical portrait, as well as indicating the passivity of childhood with its lack of involvement in things other than play. Notice that the second line begins "I played." This also foreshadows the lack of input she will have in her marriage. The poem then moves on to describe the carefree merriment of the speaker and her future husband. The wife reinforces this picture of innocent pleasure with her comment, "Two small people, without dislike or suspicion."

In the second stanza, the reader learns of her marriage, at the age of fourteen. The wife's description clearly suggests that it has been forced upon her, and she is both shy and uncomfortable with her husband. The formality of the phrase, "I married My Lord you," not only indicates the proprieties that would be common in China during that period, but, for the modern reader, emphasizes the emotional distance in the marriage. Her statement that she never laughed contrasts jarringly with her earlier picture of the two companions at ease in their world. In the fourth line of the second stanza, the husband hopes to win her as he calls to her "a thousand times." However, she only looks at the wall, lowering her heard, refusing to look back and answer his summons.

With the final four lines of the stanza, she suddenly indicates that their relationship has changed as "at fifteen [she] stopped scowling." Her next words show how dramatically her love has grown. She now "desired [her] dust to be mingled with [his] / Forever." Their union is not only welcome, but for her the end of their relationship is unthinkable. She wishes it to continue throughout eternity. Ironically, now that this love has developed, the husband's trip separates them, creating the poem's real poignancy. The reader has followed this relationship from childhood joy, through the reluctant wife's initial unhappiness, until their love matures. The two are now torn apart, and the wife is left alone to mourn his absence. The growth and development of this relationship allows the reader a greater understanding of her loss and pain.

Constancy

The portrait of the growth of their love provides a rich context to allow the reader to fully appreciate another of the poem's themes, faithfulness or constancy. When the speaker's husband left, she had just learned to love him. The reader understands her regret that her newfound passion was too brief. She also hints about her fears for his safe return: he has traveled "into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies." It is clear that he has been gone much longer than she had expected. Although she never mentions the possible dangers of traveling such a river, the reader realizes that rapids or whirlpools could explain why he has been gone so long. This would be even clearer to a Chinese reader since an ancient boatman's song tells of the perils of traveling on this particular stretch of river.

The letter makes clear how painful the wait has become for her. The two short sentences in line 25 make a strong impression. Mentioning "the paired butterflies," she simply states, "They hurt me," leaving the reader to fathom her world of pain. She continues by noting that she has grown so much older, an aging that is emotional rather than physical. However, she remains brave in her wait, ending the letter with the message that she will come to meet him, if he will only send word. She holds fast to the thought of his return, despite the hints of trouble that nature has provided: the overgrown moss, the early autumn.

Hugh Kenner, who has written several books about Pound, believes that "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" along with the poet's other verse published in 1915 provide some of the most effective emotional responses to the circumstances of World War I. Indeed, the parallel between the situation of the wife in the poem and women throughout Europe writing letters of love and longing to soldiers called away to war is striking. While this poem has no military theme, it involves the same sense of loss, of fear, of waiting: the insecurity about whether the loved one will, in fact, return. Interestingly enough, this parallel reinforces the universality of the theme in the poem. That a poem composed in the voice of a Chinese woman in the eighth century provides such an accurate emotional description of a wife or lover waiting for news from the World War I front adds to its enormous poignancy.

Nature

In a 1918 essay titled "Chinese Poetry," Pound described the central qualities of the Chinese verse-form. One was the use of nature imagery to explain or indicate human emotion or set mood. He referred to this as "metaphor by sympathy." This use of nature is a major factor in setting the tone of the final stanzas of "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter." While the five months the husband has been gone may not seem a terrible burden to the reader initially, Pound uses nature to cue the reader to mood. The "sorrowful" monkeys mirror the wife's feelings. The fact that the merchant "dragged [his] feet," cutting a path through the moss, shows his reluctance to leave; the fact that the moss has eradicated those marks of his presence, casts a worrying shadow. Much of

nature, the wind, the seasons, the leaves, seems out of order reinforcing the wife's foreboding. "The paired butterflies" provide a final, almost unbearable, touch. While these delicate creatures remain together, they torment her with the reminder that her own love is gone.

Style

This translation, "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," is structured into 5 stanzas: the first of 6 lines, and the second, third, and fourth of 4 lines each. Each of the first four stanzas is image-centered, focusing an emotional point in the history of the relationship between the river-merchant's wife and her husband. The final stanza of 10 lines and a dropped half-line begins with the presentation of a similar central image that collects an enhancing detail in each line until line 25 shifts into direct emotional statement. The last four lines mix this direct letter-writing style with the final image closing the physical and emotional distance between the river-merchant and his wife.

It was Pound's belief that the pictorial quality of the Chinese ideogram, in its "closeness to the thing itself," had the capacity for raising the mundane to the poetic. Likewise, Pound's ear for the music of conversational speech raised natural speech rhythms to the level of poetry. In this poem he expertly combines these to create a sense of the conversational naturalness of letter-writing with the focused, direct, and simple presentation of image inspired by the Chinese ideograms in which the poem was originally written.

Pound's insistence on the centrality of image to poetry is in great part responsible for the varied line lengths of this poem written in unrhymed free verse. While each of the first four stanzas concentrates on one image, the individual lines themselves are as long as Pound needs them to be to focus each component of the central image of the stanza in the mind of the reader. This technique is termed end-stopped lines, meaning that a complete idea is expressed in a line, with no spillover into the next line. However, the use of capital letters at the beginnings of each line is a signal that it is the lines of poetry, rather than the sentence constructions, that are the basic units of meaning.

The poet employs direct address throughout the poem, taking on the persona of the wife as the "I" who is writing the letter and thus entering her experience. This use of the first-person "I" also makes it possible for the reader of the poem to enter her experience. In addition, the direct address to the second-person "you" allows the poem also to be experienced as if it is a letter to the reader.

Historical Context

Chinese history presents a rich and complex tapestry. Archaeologists believe that the first organized society, the Shang dynasty, existed from approximately 1500 to 1100 B.C. Excavations reveal an agrarian yet artistic culture. From these beginnings, Chinese civilization developed a sophisticated governmental system, as well as a rich philosophical and artistic tradition. Although similar developments were occurring in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, there was only sporadic contact between the two cultures, a communication based on trade. While the Silk Road carried caravans between China and the Roman Empire, almost all interactions were limited to commercial exchanges, controlled by the traders who dominated the route.

Because of the economic importance of this trade, the Han dynasty, which ruled China from approximately 200 B.C. to 200 A.D., expanded the boundaries of China, in a successful effort to gain control of the Silk Road. However, they were not interested in cultural exchanges with outsiders. The Han ruled using a tribute system. Since they believed non-Chinese were barbarians, diplomatic relations and trading rights were extended only to those peoples who would recognize the superiority of the Chinese and prove it with the payment of a tribute. This attitude toward the rest of the world continued throughout most of Chinese history. Although visitors came to China to learn from the accomplishments of the various dynasties, they remained outsiders, not assimilated into the society.

This was true during the Tang dynasty, which assumed control in the seventh century. Many historians call this era the golden age of China, which was, at the time, the wealthiest and the most extensive empire in the world. Literature, painting, sculpture, as well as other arts flourished. Scholarship was encouraged and two encyclopedias were produced during that period. The Chinese also made several technological advances, and government was directed by a code of laws based on Confucian principles.

This Chinese culture provides a sharp contrast to the western world at this time. In the eighth century, when Chinese poet Li Po wrote, Europe was struggling to emerge from the chaos caused by the fall of the Roman Empire. Muslim Arabs had invaded Spain; Slavic invaders attacked from the East. Although Charlemagne attempted to recreate a new Holy Roman Empire, the strong nation states of Europe would not emerge for a few more centuries. Ironically, the old trade routes between East and West continued unabated, since the turmoil never diminished the demand for spices from the Orient.

By the twelfth century, however, the power balance was reversed. Warring factions weakened China, and this left the nation vulnerable to the onslaught of the Mongol forces led by the great warrior, Genghis Khan, who extended his empire across Asia. After his death, power was distributed among his sons and China was left to the care of his son, Kublai Khan, who recognized the achievements and scholarship of the Chinese.

Kublai Khan is familiar to westerners because of the writings of Marco Polo who visited the imperial court in 1275. When his accounts of the grandeur, even superiority, of the Asian world first reached Europe, these tales were considered to be more fantasy than reality. However, since there had been commercial contact between East and West for centuries, eventually similar reports reinforced the claims of Marco Polo. The riches of the Orient soon became an irresistible lure to western explorers and adventurers.

Both China and the nations that emerged in Europe during the late medieval and Renaissance periods were proud, even arrogant. The Chinese dynasties, on their part, felt no need to pursue anything beyond their own boundaries. They were serf-sufficient, possessors of a rich and elaborate culture. Foreigners were still viewed as barbarians. In the western world, on the other hand, the development of strong nation states fueled the desire for exploration and conquest. Explorers believed that the new worlds that were now discovered were rightly theirs, to claim and plunder. Seagoing journeys revived interest in the East. In fact, Columbus's voyage was supported by Ferdinand and Isabella, the rulers of Spain, because they had visions of great profits to be taken from the Orient.

The Portuguese, who were the first to reach China, in 1514, planned to gain fortunes by seizing control of the rich spice trade, which was dominated by Arab traders. The Chinese authorities were dismayed by the arrival of these "barbarians." Rumors abounded along the areas where the Portuguese sailed that they were cannibals who wanted to buy or steal children to eat them. The Chinese government attempted to limit all foreign influence as much as possible, refusing to permit colonies on the mainland. Only mercantile, not diplomatic, relations existed between China and Europe.

Eventually, as the West sought to force China to allow more trade, conflict became inevitable. Each side felt themselves unfairly treated; each felt themselves a superior culture. England resented the failure of China to respond to its diplomatic overtures. China was insulted by the insensitive behavior of English diplomats. England wanted Chinese tea, but unfortunately produced no comparable item that the Chinese desired. Therefore, they tried to force China to make opium legal so that the English could bring it to China from India in exchange for the tea. The eventual result was the Opium Wars. England eventually won both wars, forcing China to open more ports and allow the importation of opium.

Although China still struggled to resist western aggression, the nation was forced to endure continual attacks on its sovereignty. Eventually resentment caused the formation of secret societies who, in 1899, launched several attacks against westerners in China. Although this movement, the Boxer Rebellion, was quashed within a year, it helped bring about a new government for China. In 1912, just three years before *Cathay*was published, the Republic of China was formed with Sun Yat-sen as its president.

Critical Overview

American critic and poet T. S. Eliot has called Pound "the inventor of Chinese poetry" for the twentieth century. Nevertheless, he sees *Cathay: Translations,* containing the much anthologized poem " The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," as more than intelligent literary archaeology of poems from eighth century China. It establishes Pound's particular literary genius "for expressing himself through historical masks" that would become the hallmark of his later major work, the *Cantos.* It is Eliot's critical assessment, furthermore, that the value of Pound's work in this collection is the clarity with which he presents his perception that "the present is no more than the present significance of the past." In fact, Eliot maintains that Pound's translations of ancient Chinese poetry are decidedly Modernist because they affirm the universality of human experience through time and across cultures.

Eliot grants that while Pound's style in these translations might not reflect that of the Chinese originals, his poetic concern for image provides an effective means for "transporting the content" of the original picture-making Chinese ideograms. Thus the value of these poems is not as Chinese translations, but as a stage in the development of Pound's poetic concerns from his original concepts of "luminous detail" and "Imagism," through "vortex" and "haiku" and "metaphor," and ultimately to the "ideogrammatic composition" of his *Cantos.*

Pound is not generally viewed as especially gifted in composing his own original poems, but the accusation of Chinese language scholars that he mistranslates the poems of this volume is brushed aside by such critics of poetry as Hugh Kenner, who is perfectly willing to read them as "Pound's interpretative paraphrases that are informed by his own concerns and background." It is Michael Alexander's estimation that these poems have been "underrated" as mere translations, rather than appreciated for their highly disciplined free verse. Indeed, as William Pratt has noted, "the relatively pure images of *Cathay ...* seem less and less like translations and more and more like original poems."

William Van O'Connor suggests that Pound's "translations" have a song-like quality, which he notes especially in " The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter." In this poem Pound's belief that poetry always had and always should reflect the conversational speech of its day combines with his intensive study of musical forms to achieve the composition of lyrical natural lines toward the development of the convincing voice of the poem's persona.

M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall acknowledge the "rhythmic successes" of such poems as "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" as responsible for a move away from dramatic presentation of character and monologue toward "what the poem before us is creating." It is their contention that these poems go beyond "Imagism" and "phanopoeia" ("the casting of images upon the visual imagination"), engendering a progression of centered images in a sequence, or pattern, of human thought and emotion.

Accordingly, David E. Ward postulates that the guiding principle of Pound's theory is a belief in a shared poetic tradition that allows full expression of the emotional patterns of human experience and response. "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" is an eloquent manifestation of this principle.

Critical Essay #2

Jonathan N. Barron

Jonathan N. Barron is associate professor of English at the University ofSouthern Mississippi. He has written numerous articles and edited a number of books of essays on poetry, and is editor of The Robert Frost Review. *In the following essay, Barron shows why Pound's poem, using free-verse poetic technique, succeeds as a masterpiece of translation.*

It is said that Pound created the Chinese poem in English. The attributes of Asian poetry, particularly of Chinese poetry, that are now familiar to students of poetryclean, spare, description; quiet tones; precise use of proper nouns and simple active verbsare familiar in large part because of Pound. Despite this achievement, Pound's contemporary, the great American poet Robert Frost, dismissed the very idea of poetic translation as impossible: "Poetry," he said, "is what gets lost in translation." According to Frost, poetry is so specific to its host language that if one translates a poem one loses all that made it poetic in the first place. Poetry, according to Frost, is so dependent on the music of the spoken sound of the actual language, that no foreign language poem could ever be appreciated for its poetry if rendered into English. It would, in effect, be like reading an opera without ever hearing a note of it performed.

"The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter" may well be the best challenge to Frost's theory available in English. In this poem, Pound translates from the Chinese to the English and, as the great critic of Modern poetry Hugh Kenner wrote in *The Pound Era,* he "invents Chinese poetry for our time." The poem is a funny kind of translation because it comes from the notebooks of Ernest Fenellosa, a notable scholar of Japanese and Chinese literature. Because Fenellosa was mostly familiar with Japanese, he, himself, translated the poems' Chinese proper names into Japanese. As a result, all of the proper names, even the name of the poet who originally wrote "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," are given their name in Japanese translation. The note to the poem says the poet was Rihaku but that is just the Japanese name for Li Po. When Pound made this translation, he was living in London, in Kensington. This American living in London, therefore, came across the world of Chinese poetry by reading the work of another American scholar. As Kenner put it: "A Li Po ... reach[ed] Kensington by way of Tokyo, through the intercession of [Fenollosa] a Harvard-educated enthusiast of Spanish descent." Pound knew Fenollosa's work because the scholar's wife had given him his notebooks. The notebooks contained translations, or notes on 150 poems. Of them, Pound translated 14 into English, and of them, "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter" has achieved the status of masterpiece.

This poem is so well regarded because, ultimately, it translates on three distinct levels. First, Pound transcribes the words and their meaning from the Chinese language to the English. Second, he translates one cultural tradition, China and the Far East, into the idiom of another cultural tradition: Anglo-American culture. Third, he translates the ancient pastthe events of the original Chinese poem which take place in the eighth

century□into the present of the twentieth century. In so doing, Pound manages to convey a culturally specific remote w orld□eighth-century China□into the modern twentieth century.

How did Pound do it? As Kenner notes about the little volume of translations, *Cathay*(1915), that Pound published and that contains "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter," its "real achievement" lay in its ability to "rethink the nature of an English poem." In this poem, Pound raised some fundamental questions: must poetry have meter and rhyme, or if not rhyme, meter? Might "free verse" be a source not just for translation but for genuine poetry? Pound's answer was "yes."

"The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter," for example, makes use of "free-verse" technique. That is to say, from one line to the next, the poem follows no consistent metrical or rhyming pattern. Pound is able to maintain a Chinese-language feeling in the poem because of the freedom such verse permits. Again, Kenner tells us that Pound's translations from the Chinese were the very first in English ever to be derived from the transcription of the actual Chinese words, Fenollosa's "detailed notes on Chinese texts." Pound, in other words, did not use some other English translation. More importantly, they were, says Kenner, the first English translations to "abandon rhyme and fixed stress count." What this means is that Pound refuses to mimic a Chinese metrical pattern that would only make sense to Chinese speakers. Had Pound tried to make the poem sound Chinese or conform to Chinese rules of poetry he would, indeed, have lost the poetry in the translation: the poem would sound silly, artificial, even weird to English speakers unfamiliar with Chinese sound patterns. Similarly, Pound also refuses to make the poem fit into one of the many English metrical forms available. Had he done that there would be no Chinese sound to the poem at all. Instead, he resorts to free verse, to no one particular sound or rhyme pattern at all. In so doing, he is able to invent his own formal rules and thus create a Chinese-sounding rhythm, music, and beauty. In short, he makes poetry happen by making up his own set of rules.

How is it possible for Pound to render the Chinese into English? How did he do it? What are the rules he adopted for his poem that enabled him to convey the distinctive quality of Chinese poetry in an English-language poem? The answer is simple: by describing things in exact detail and by focusing on culturally specific images and things in his poem that can only make sense if they are understood in the terms provided by eighth-century China. In this poem, Pound refuses to generalize. His rule is simple. Every poetic line will contain a specific image: new image, new line. Also, every stanza will develop a new chapter in the speaker's life□new period in her life, new stanza. In what follows, then, I offer a guide through the poem by looking carefully at these rules, at the line breaks, and the stanza divisions in order to show how the poem is built entirely out of specifically Chinese references, scenes, cultural assumptions, and imagery.

In the five stanzas that constitute this poem, Pound is able to convey the autobiography of a sixteen-year-old Chinese girl from nearly a thousand years ago (eighth century CE.) In so doing, he makes her and her story new. In the first stanza, for example, Pound develops the title of the poem: this is, in fact, to be understood as a letter written by a wife to her husband:

While my hair was still cut straight across my

forehead

I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.

You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,

You walked about my seat, playing with blue

plums.

And we went on living in the village ofChokan:

Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

Notable here is the focus on what we can see. Not only does the surface, obvious imagery reveal the location: this is China, and this is a Chinese woman talking, but it also reveals a deeper more interesting psychological story as well. Notice how this stanza depends on particulars, on visible things, not on generalizations. Notice that the woman does not say, "I've know you a very long time husband, ever since we were kids." Instead, every single line gives a new image, a new thing to understand. Remember the rule: new image, new line. For example, in the first line she talks about "her hair cut straight." This implies, and we can only know this from the context provided both by the poem's note and by the title, that she is telling us about her life as a girl. Evidently, this is a hairstyle common to unmarried Chinese girls. In the second line, she gives us a new image and in this image the story moves a little further along. Her childhood was happy, serene, and pleasant. The simple image of the flowers conveys this meaning. In the third line a new image and a new character are introduced. Now we meet her future husband, a fun-loving kid. Note that we know this only from the specific objects of his play, "bamboo stilts," "horse": these objects reveal the scene to be in Asia, not in America. In short, the Chinese aspect of the poem is made visible to us through the writer's focus on the things of Chinese life: the customs of the people, the games of the children. Notice, too, that the tone of this stanza is quiet. The many commas and pauses force us to speak the lines quietly, deliberately.

Just as every line conveys one single new image, one new element, so, too, every stanza contains a new chapter in the life of this woman. If the first chapter, or stanza, depicts her childhood, then, the second stanza depicts her life as a wife:

At fourteen I married My Lord you. I never laughed, being bashful. Lowering my head, I looked at the wall. Called to a thousand times, I never looked back.

By the second stanza, the poem "feels" Chinese. Why? Because of the quiet tone, certainly, but more than that because of the specific imagery. The details, here, depict a traditional, and traditionally submissive wife in eighth-century China, a girl who becomes a "woman" at the age of fourteen. By raising these new and culturally specific points, this stanza also introduces a new set of issues. For why on earth should this wife have

to remind her husband that he is her husband and that they did know each other? If this poem really is a letter she surely should not have to tell her husband what he must very well know.

What is happening is that these first two stanzas establish a justification for the rest of the poemthree stanzas of complaint, of quiet anger. In the end, what the poem depicts is a portrait of the inner life of a woman. Ultimately, the poem/letter is meant to remind her husband of her role as his wife, of her existence, of their relationship. It is meant to be a gentle way of telling him not to forget, or betray her. Remember, she is a river-merchant's wife in eighth-century China. This is like being a traveling salesman's wife today. In those days, the river was the only major source of travel and commerce. Her husband, as a merchant, was more often not at home than at home. Evidently, his wife is tired of this situation. Therefore, she writes him a letter. The first two stanzas of this letter/poem establish her role as a good, submissive, Chinese wife of the eighth century. In effect, she is reminding him of their relationship so that he will know that if she complains she does so only as a good eighth-century partner in marriage. The first two stanzas, therefore, give her the right to complain because they say, in effect, "I have been a good wife and as such a wife I now feel the need to speak."

The poetry, then, is as much in the story of this wife's quiet anger directed at her husband as it is in the way that the story is told. The poem feels as if it were in another language in part due to the rhythm, in part due to the tone, but, as I have been arguing, mostly because of the particular details and images. These details tell a decidedly old-fashioned culturally specific story of a lonely wife of a river merchant in a particular time and place. In stanza three:

At fifteen I stopped scowling,

I desired my dust to be mingled with yours

Forever and forever and forever.

Why should I climb the look out?

This is a crucial stanza to the story of the poem because here the wife confesses the depths of her love for her husband. Notice, again, that Pound still adheres to his own rule: one image per line. Notice, too, that a new chapter has begun and so a new stanza begins. In this case, the chapter is her life after a year of marriage: her life at the age of fifteen. But her point here is to confess the depth of her love. If she "scowled" at first, now she would like to have their "dust" mingled. In these simple images the generalizing cliche, "I love you always and forever," is communicated through the use of specific images. How, then, are we to interpret this stanza's last line?

Three ways. First, the look out is the only means she has of seeing the return of her husband. Therefore, this is a rhetorical, sarcastic, ironic question. She is, in effect, saying: "how could you possibly think I don't miss you. Why should I climb the look out! Are you crazy? How could I not want to climb it?" Second: "I love you so much, our love is so eternal, my trust in you is so absolute that I have no need to climb the look out. Of

course you will come back. Why should I climb a lookout to see if you are coming?" That would imply that she thinks he might not be coming back. She says, in effect, "since I know you will return I have no need to climb the look out. Why should I climb it?" This is my own personal reading of that line but a third reading is possible: "I don't know if you will come back. Will you? Give me a reason. Why should I climb the look out?" Whatever reading one assigns to that line, its position as the last line of the stanza is a kind of gauntlet thrown down to her husband. All three readings, after all, say, in effect, that she loves him dearly and hopes he loves her enough to return.

In the fourth stanza, therefore, the story moves to the result of such love. If the third stanza is an awakening to consciousness of the wife's love for her husband then the fourth stanza communicates her sadness. Both stanzas are remarkable because a wife in the eighth century had no right to confess her feelings about anything. If her husband abandons her to go on business, her job as a "good wife" was to suffer in silence and wait. Yet, she decides, despite the cultural tradition against such talk, to express her feelings. And, not only does she express the depths of her love, but she dares even to complain. For her to say that she is lonely, that, in fact, she is also a little angry as well, is, in the terms of the time period, all but heresy:

At sixteen you departed,

and you went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of

swirling eddies,

And you have been gone five months. The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

In this stanza, we are brought into the present moment. This chapter of her life is now, the present telling of the tale. Here she says that she is now 16 years old. What she implies, then, is that just as she grew accustomed to their life as a married couple (the past year), he left. The third line of this stanza is quiet and seems to be nothing more than description. But the tone here must be read in terms of the larger context. For her to say, "you have been gone five months" is another way of saying, "I am so lonely!" It is even a complaint: "how could you abandon me, your own wife, for so long!" We are trained to see this because of the final image concluding the stanza. The monkeys, in a way, become a metaphor for the emotional state of the wife. Their "sorrowful noise" merely speaks aloud what she feels.

The most interesting and poignant section of the poem is the concluding fifth stanza. For here, the new chapter is not a new period in her life but a new awareness, a realization, a new sense of what it means to be a wife, and especially this Chinese wife. This stanza is a particular triumph of the one new image, one new line rule. And of the all the images in this stanza the following should be singled out:

The paired butterflies are already yellow with

August

Over the grass in the West garden; They hurt me. I grow older.

This girl's contemplation of the butterflies, of the natural order of things, of continuity in nature, of growth and renewal, and of beauty in companionship is another way of her saying: "I realize now how much I have lost with you, my husband, being gone." If we read the butterflies as a metaphor for her and her husband then she is saying that she and he are like paired butterflies except that they are not together. To see such pairs, then, "hurts" her because it reminds her how much she needs her husband. Notice, then, that this anger, and this complaint is based entirely on love. Only after her husband is absent does she realize the meaning of and the depth of her own love. In this letter/poem, then, she is communicating that love. To say "I grow older" is another way of saying, "I have grown wiser." She now understands the meaning of love. The last four lines of the poem, then, are more than just description. They are the inevitable result of the wisdom she has come to only now, in this fifth stanza.

The final four lines tell us that she is prepared to wait, that she will not give up on her husband, that if she feels angry she is by no means angry about or mistrustful of his love. In the end, the poem becomes a kind of meditative ode□a poem where one speaker in the course of the poem teaches herself a truth. It may only go as far as "Cho-fu-sa," and it may depend entirely on our knowledge as readers of what it means to be an eighth-century Chinese wife. Indeed, if that is the case, if it is true that her knowledge, her wisdom can only make sense if we know what it is like to be a Chinese sixteen-year-old wife in the eighth century then this poem as a translation from the Chinese of Li Po has, thanks to Pound, given us another culture and another time: it has become a masterpiece of translation itself.

Source: Jonathan N. Barron, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Adaptations

Unapix released a 1995 biography titled *Ezra Pound.*

Ezra Pound: Visions and Voices, a 1988 Mystic Fire Video, presents Pound's life and poetry.

Topics for Further Study

In 1948, Ezra Pound won the Bollingen Prize for the best volume of poetry published that year. Many people were highly critical of this award since he had been accused of treason during World War II by the U.S. government. Evaluate both sides of the controversy and explain which position you find most convincing.

The letter is a common device used in both literature and song. Find some other examples of letters, and discuss whether the author has used the letter form effectively.

Both Pound and Li-Po found themselves in conflict with governmental authorities. Compare/ contrast their difficulties.

Compare and Contrast

1916: Einstein announces his general theory of relativity.

1997: Einstein again makes scientific headlines when astronomers announce signs that could prove the accuracy of the theory of relativity. Spinning bodies twist space and time along with them, which is an inevitable result of Einstein's theory.

1915: The Germans use chlorine gas at the Second Battle of Ypres□the first time poison gas is employed in conflict.

1961: The United States begins "operational field tests," spraying the defoliant Agent Orange over Vietnam. The program continues until 1971.

1995: Twelve people are killed in a terrorist attack using Sarin gas on a Japanese subway.

1999: The Defense Department begins a controversial program to vaccinate all military personnel against anthrax. Several soldiers who have refused on the grounds that not enough is known about the vaccine's safety have been court-martialed.

What Do I Read Next?

Several poems by Li Po are included in the 1975 Anchor Press anthology *Sunflower Splendor: 3000 Years of Chinese Poetry,* which provides an excellent introduction to Chinese poetry supplemented by helpful explanatory materials.

Ezra Pound noted that "The River-Merchant's Wife" had a style and tone that would make it seem at home in Robert Browning's early collection of poetry titled *Men and Women,* available from Oxford University Press, 1972.

In *Digging for the Treasure: Translation after Pound,* published by Peter Lang in 1984, Ronnie Apter discusses Pound's ability to remain faithful to the original poem while translating for a twentieth-century reader.

*Cathay*is included in Pound's *Collected Shorter Poems* (Faber & Faber, 1968), a volume that includes many of Pound more accessible works.

Simon Elegant's *A Floating Life: the Adventures of Li Po: an Historical Novel* is a beautifully written tale that recreates the adventurous, flamboyant life of Li Po, describing his role in the golden age of Chinese culture.

The Case of Ezra Pound presents documentary evidence, testimony, and the response of many contemporary poets to the trial of Ezra Pound. This fascinating study was edited by Charles Norman and was published by Funk & Wagnells in 1968.

James Laughlin's 1985 work *Pound as Wuz: Essays and Lectures on Ezra Pound* is a collection of insightful, frequently touching memories based on Laughlin's relationship with Pound in the years before World War II.

Van Wyck Brooks discusses the influence of Oriental art and philosophy on Western artists in *Fenollosa and his Circle,* a biography of the man upon whose preliminary work *Cathay*is based.

Published by Oxford University Press in 1999, *Ezra and Dorothy Pound: Letters in Captivity, 1945-46* presents an fascinating picture of their relationship, along with a chilling picture of his captivity.

Further Study

Chisholm, Lawrence W., *Fenollosa: The Far East and American Culture,* New Haven:Yale University Press, 1963. This book contains an interesting description of the influence of Oriental thought and art on many American artists and philosophers.

Froula, Christine, *A Guide to Ezra Pound's Selected Poems,* New York: New Directions, 1982.

This helpful introduction to Pound includes comments on the wife's attitudes in the "The River Mer-chan't Wife. "Kenner, Hugh, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound,* Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1951.

This is one of the best sources for a clear introduction to Pound and his poetry.

Witemeyer, Hugh, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound, Forms and Renewal, 1908-1920,* Berkeley: University ofCalifornia Press, 1969.

The book discusses Pound's perspectives on Chinese poetry, discussing its similarity to Imagism.

Yip, Wai-lim, *Ezra Pound's Cathay,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.

In this detailed study of *Cathay,* Yip examines three stages of the poems: the original, Fenollosa's English version, and Pound's translation.

Bibliography

Alexander, Michael, *The Poetic Achievement of "Ezra Pound,* University ofCalifornia Press, 1979, 247 p. Eliot, T. S., "The Method of Pound," *The Athenaeum,* No. 4669, October 24, 1919, pp. 1065-66.

Kenner, Hugh, *The Pound Era,* Berkeley:California University Press, 1971.

O'Connor, William Van, *Ezra Pound,* ("University ofMinnesota Pamphlets on American Writers" series, No. 26), University ofMinnesota Press, 1963.

Pratt, William, "Ezra Pound and the Image," in *Ezra Pound: The London Years: 1908-1920,* edited by Philip Grover, AMS Press, 1978, pp. 15-30.

Rosenthal, M. L., and Sally M. Gall, "Ezra Pound I: The Early Sequences," in their *The Modern Poetic Sequence:*

"The Genius of Modern Poetry, " Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 184-203.

Ward, David E, "The Emperor's Clothes?" *Essays in Criticism,* January, 1968, pp. 68-73.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

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

Project Editor
David Galens

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

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

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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

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

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

©1997-2002; ©2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc.

Gale and Design® and Thomson Learning™ are trademarks used herein under license.

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

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any

form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

For permission to use material from this product, submit your request via Web at http://www.gale-edit.com/permissions, or you may download our Permissions Request form and submit your request by fax or mail to:

Permissions Department
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Permissions Hotline:
248-699-8006 or 800-877-4253, ext. 8006
Fax: 248-699-8074 or 800-762-4058

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, The Gale Group, Inc. does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. The Gale Group, Inc. accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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