The Rhodora Study Guide

The Rhodora by Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Introduction

"The Rhodora" was published in 1847 in *Poems*, the first of Emerson's two volumes of poetry. In this response to a question, Emerson finds an opportunity to celebrate a flower simply for "being." A deeper look, however, reveals that the poem is in keeping with Emerson's transcendentalist beliefs about the mystical unity of God's love throughout all nature. He comes to an appreciation of the Rhodora, a relatively common New England flowering shrub, by seeing it in its own context□by visiting it at home□and he offers that appreciation as a model for contemplating all of nature.

Readers might compare this to an earlier poem of William Wordsworth's, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," which also concerns the effect of an encounter with flowers in the wild. Wordsworth was a literary idol of Emerson, and his work profoundly influenced Emerson. For a more contemporary yet similar approach, readers might also investigate some of the work of e. e. cummings, whom many considered a modern transcendentalist.

Author Biography

Emerson was born in Boston in 1803. He was the son of Ruth Haskins Emerson and William Emerson, a Unitarian minister who died when his son was eight. Emerson attended Boston Public Latin School and then enrolled in Harvard College at the age of fourteen. After graduation, he briefly tried teaching but soon returned to Harvard to attend divinity school. He was ordained a minister in 1829. That same year, he married Ellen Tucker, who died of tuberculosis only a year and a half later. Experiencing doubts about Christianity and the validity of organized religion, Emerson resigned his ministry in 1832. He spent the next several months traveling in Europe. While visiting a Paris botanical exhibition, Emerson had a vision of the intimate connection between humans and nature, and he resolved to be a naturalist. In Great Britain, Emerson met several of his literary idols, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Thomas Carlyle, who became a lifelong friend. Upon returning to the United States in 1833, Emerson began a career as a public lecturer, speaking on various topics, including science, biography, literature, and travel. Emerson married Lydia Jackson in 1835 and settled in Concord, Massachusetts, where, except for regular trips in America and abroad, he resided for the rest of his life. In Concord, Emerson became the center of a discussion group called the Transcendentalist Club, which met to discuss religious and philosophical issues. Emerson and the other members of the group developed the theory of transcendentalism, which holds that humanity and nature are in essence the same, are merely different manifestations of the divine spirit. Transcendentalism has been one of the most influential ideas in American literary history. Emerson's first book, *Nature*, an important statement of his transcendentalist views, was published in 1836. The succeeding decade was the most productive period in Emerson's career, in which he continued to deliver lectures while publishing collections of his philosophical essays and poetry, as well as serving as editor of the *Dial*, a publication of the transcendentalist movement. During the 1850s and 1860s, Emerson was an outspoken opponent of slavery and actively campaigned for abolition. By the end of the 1860s, however, his memory began to fail, and he gradually slipped into senility. He died at home in Concord in 1882.

Poem Text

On Being Asked, Whence is the Flower?

In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,
I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.
The purple petals fallen in the pool,
Made the black water with their beauty gay;
Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,
And court the flower that cheapens his array.
Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being:
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!
I never thought to ask, I never knew;
But, in my simple ignorance, suppose
The self-same Power that brought me there brought
you.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

The speaker begins by noting the season and the general weather. It is May, when flowers are just beginning to bloom; an off-shore breeze has inspired him (and, noting the plural use of "solitudes," possibly a companion) to take a walk. He then describes coming upon the rhodora and its immediate surroundings, which seem to indicate that the plant is alone in an otherwise none too thrilling spot: it is a damp nook or corner; the brook is not babbling happily, but sluggishly. He even uses the word "desert," which seems oddly misplaced for this part of the world, especially given the description of the nook. However, the New England spring comes notoriously late, following several months of very muddy conditions, so perhaps it is the desert of mud□with no other blooms in sight□that Emerson is referring to. As line 3 reveals, the rhodora is a shrub that blooms before its leaves appear, meaning that the petals stand out in stark relief.

Lines 5-6

With the alliterative "P's" in line 5, Emerson uses the most musical line in the poem to describe the flower itself. Notice, though, that the petals have fallen into a pool of black water, which might mean that it is really more of a stagnant puddle, an image that is consistent with the sluggish brook of line 4. Perhaps the speaker was particularly struck by the purple blooms because they were in such an otherwise unattractive water, just as the water brought a special beauty to the otherwise simple petals.

ines 7-8

Emerson continues to add colors, as "red-bird" joins the purple petals and black water. The bird's plumes will be outdone, says the speaker, by the flower's color. He also uses the word "court," which hints at the fertility of spring.

Lines 9-10

As the second half of the poem starts, the speaker shifts and addresses the flower, rather than the companion whose question inspired the poem. He even uses an exclamation point to add a celebratory verve to the line. The rest of this couplet, and the two lines that follow, have an implication of Emerson's impatience with those who would elevate Man above Nature. Readers might even hear a certain sarcasm for the so-called sages who fail to appreciate the flower's charm or beauty, as well as the majesty of the earth and sky.

Lines 11-12

The use of the affectionate term "dear" personalizes the flower even more. The speaker also cleverly plays off those who would ask, and have asked, "what's the purpose of this flower?" by pointedly remarking that the purpose of one's eyes is to appreciate beauty for its own sake, without asking the flower to justify its existence.

Lines 13-14

Continuing the thought of the previous lines, the speaker declares that it never even occurred to him to ask the simple rhodora what purpose it served. Furthermore, he considers it the rival of the rose, the most poetically celebrated flower of all.

Lines 15-16

The "simple ignorance" is probably written with a dash of irony since the rest of the poem seems to argue that the speaker's view is more knowledgeable, or at least more encompassing and tolerant, than that of those who question the flower's purpose. The last line openly suggests that since the rhodora was made by God as surely and as expertly as He made Man, the flower—and by extension all living things—should be granted a deserved respect and honor. The flower might just as easily have asked, and have a God-given right to ask, whence is this man? For Emerson, the answer to both questions might be that man and flower both came from the self-same Power—the Creator—and that power brought each of them to this meeting as equals.

To better understand this final point, it is helpful to consider what Emerson said of himself as a poet, in an 1862 entry in his journal: "I am a bard because I stand near them [flowers, rocks, trees, etc.], and apprehend all they utter, and with pure joy hear that which I also would say." In other words, Emerson and nature not only speak the same language, but they speak for each other.

Themes

Divinity

The speaker's belief in a divine power that guides the events of the world is evident in the final two lines: "But, in my simple ignorance, suppose / The self-same Power that brought me there brought you." The speaker is responding to the question of why the rhodora is in such a secluded place. He is satisfied with the answer that God guides the flower's place in the world, just as He guides the speaker's. This conclusion reveals a belief that the world is ordered according to a divine plan, and the speaker's role is merely to accept his place in that plan. He is appreciative of the lessons he learns from nature; presumably, he seeks the wisdom of nature because of his belief that it is ordered by God.

The speaker is subtle in his spiritual assertions; the poet does not use the word "God." Instead, he capitalizes "Power" to let the reader know that he means a divine power. The speaker also capitalizes "Beauty," indicating that the beauty is of divine origin. When the speaker says "Beauty is its own excuse for being," he makes the claim that the beauty to which he refers requires no justification nor does it need a forum in which to be appreciated. That it is divine makes it inherently significant, even unseen in the middle of the woods. By extension, the speaker has the same significance, because he, too, is divinely directed.

Beauty

The speaker happens upon a "fresh" rhodora as he walks through the woods. He is immediately moved to describe it in the context of its bland surroundings. The rhodora seems to bring vibrancy and beauty to an otherwise dull landscape. The speaker describes the setting as a "damp nook" near a "sluggish brook" of "black water." There are no birds; the speaker only imagines that a bird might be drawn to the area because of the rhodora. He writes, "Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool, / And court the flower that cheapens his array." To the speaker, an image as beautiful and lively as a redbird is no match for the beauty of the rhodora, and even the bird knows it.

The speaker is so moved by the rhodora's beauty that he anticipates wise people ("sages") wondering why such a flower is growing in a desolate area where it might never be seen. The response is that beauty is worthwhile in its very existence, not just in being admired. Given that the speaker capitalizes the word "Beauty," the reader can expand the idea to include anything that is fundamentally good or divine. The reader can assume, therefore, that virtues (such as honesty, loyalty, and compassion), acts of kindness, prayers, and any other examples of fundamental goodness are worthwhile whether anyone notices or admires them.

Surprise Inspiration

The poet is surprised to be so inspired by the rhodora. He does not expect to be struck with a profound insight as he casually walks through the woods, yet he is. His description of the rhodora's surroundings indicates that the rhodora seems out of place, so the speaker is surprised to find it there. In line nine, the speaker has a surprising revelation when he exclaims, "Rhodora!" At this point, he comments that the sages would not understand what he is realizing at that very moment—that the beauty of the rhodora has inherent value apart from being admired by human eyes. In line thirteen, the speaker addresses the rhodora as the "rival of the rose." Perhaps no other flower has been the subject of as much poetry as the rose, yet here the speaker claims that the rhodora is its rival. The rhodora is a native flowering shrub in New England. It is not rare or unexpected, so it is somewhat surprising that it should be the inspiration of a poem.

Style

In "The Rhodora," Emerson uses a familiar rhyme scheme of two paired couplets, followed by four lines of alternating rhymes. For instance, lines 9-16 end with the following sounds: why□sky / seeing□being / rose□knew suppose□ you.

Each eight-line section constitutes one half of the sixteen-line poem, resulting in a unified and balanced feel to the piece. The rhyme scheme provides an additional surrounding structure to the iambic pentameter Emerson uses for this poem. "Iambic" refers to a segment of two syllables where the emphasis, or stress, falls on the second syllable. It is "pentameter" (*penta* meaning *five*) because each line has five two-syllable pairs. An example of this is in line 5:

The pur / ple pet / als fal / len in / the pool.

The stresses on the second syllables emphasize the alliteration of purple, petals, and pool by falling on the "P's."

The observant reader might note that the final line of the poem, line 16, has eleven syllables, not ten. Whenever an iambic line has an extra unstressed syllable, it is said to have a "female ending," because it ends softly. Emerson's use of this device only at the end of the poem is similar to a soft final chord in a song, as opposed to a heavy or abrupt one, that gently fades away. In addition, because the last unstressed syllable is the word "you," meaning the rhodora, it creates an open and lingering sound that both literally echoes and also thematically echoes Emerson's celebration of the flower itself.

Historical Context

Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism was a philosophical movement in Europe, based heavily on the writings of Immanuel Kant. When it reached the United States, however, the movement grew to encompass literature. Most scholars acknowledge Emerson as the writer who had the strongest influence on the movement's development in New England. Its early formation came from meetings of a small group of people interested in discussing new philosophies. Central to their discussions was the idea that there was a personal and intuitive force that transcended the material world. This force revealed itself to people under certain circumstances, making it possible to learn from nature and to acquire wisdom. Transcendentalism claims that nature has a wealth of knowledge and wisdom available to those committed to learning from it. Henry David Thoreau took this belief very seriously, and his *Walden* is the result of his commitment to live alone in nature to learn what it had to teach him. Transcendentalists also praised manual labor and intellectual fellowship. They strove to support one another's spiritual lives, which focused on personal growth through individual relationships with God rather than membership in an organized church. Their adherence to the values of democracy, individualism, and self-reliance explains why so many transcendentalists were involved in social reform. They were especially interested in abolishing slavery and gaining equality for women.

Two events were important to the rise of transcendentalism in New England. First was the launch, in 1840, of the *Dial*, a magazine dedicated to transcendentalist thought. Among its contributors were Emerson, Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller. The magazine was published until 1844. The second event was the founding of Brook Farm, a utopian community sponsored by the Transcendentalist Club of Boston. Its objective was to provide for everyone's basic needs so that they would have the opportunity to develop themselves intellectually and spiritually. Brook Farm was planned as a self-sustaining farm where members would rotate duties. Started in 1841, Brook Farm only lasted until 1846, when various factors, including dissension and poor soil, brought about its closing.

Women's Rights

During the first half of the nineteenth century, social changes were slowly improving conditions for women. In 1821, Emma Willard established America's first school for girls, Troy Female Seminary. In 1824, the first public school for girls opened in Worcester, Massachusetts. Oberlin College awarded the first college degree to a woman in 1841. These milestones were important because educated girls expected to be full participants in society and to have opportunities to use their educations. Finding few such opportunities, they began to organize to seek social reform. Many girls, such as Margaret Fuller, received their early education at home before attending educational

institutions. Fuller went on to be an outspoken women's rights advocate and the first editor of the transcendentalist magazine the *Dial*, established in 1840.

Sarah Grimke and her sister, Angelina, wrote persuasive pamphlets in the mid-1830s denouncing the oppression of blacks and women. These pamphlets include *An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South, Address to Free Colored Americans*, and *Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States*. Sarah also wrote a longer work entitled *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* in 1838. The Grimke sisters were outraged by the legislated powerlessness of women. They believed that women should be given the same rights and opportunities as men, including the right to vote and own land. Through their actions, they challenged social assumptions about the appropriate position of women in society. Although they encouraged women to excel at their domestic duties, they also expected women to be taken seriously in the public domain as writers and speakers.

Critical Overview

John Jay Chapman, whose admiration of Emerson did not prevent him from offering unflattering criticism of his poetry, nonetheless considered "The Rhodora" to be among "that class of poetry which . . . is poetry because it is the perfection of statement." Whether or not one agrees with the poet's sentiment is irrelevant, Chapman appears to say; the piece itself is so finely composed and its argument so convincingly made, that it must be admired. This poem is also a fine example of what Chapman was referring to when he said,

> [Emerson's] worship of the New England landscape
> amounts to a religion. His poems do that most wonderful
> thing, make us feel that we are alone in the
> fields and with the trees,—not English fields nor
> French lanes, but New England meadows and
> uplands.

Bliss Perry, in his 1931 essay titled "The Mystic and the Poet," notes that "The Rhodora" is one of a number of Emerson's works that deals with a chance encounter in nature. "In such poems," he writes "there is little attempt to generalize or to enforce any doctrine." Perry notes that Matthew Arnold failed to understand a similar poem of Emerson's ("The Titmouse") simply because Arnold had never seen such an animal himself, and a similar response could be made to those who do not appreciate Emerson's celebration of a common New England shrub in this poem.

Arnold, an Englishman, while a great admirer of Emerson's overall contribution to American letters, was a harsh critic of his poetry, especially his Nature poems. In his essay in *Macmillan's Magazine* of May 1884, Arnold explained that he considered Emerson a failure as a poet because his meaning was often unclear, leaving the reader to guess at it. According to Arnold, "a failure of this kind goes through almost all [Emerson's] verse, keeps him amid symbolism and allusion and the fringes of things, and, in spite of his spiritual power, deeply impairs his poetic value."

Char Mollison and Charles C. Walcutt, on the other hand, note in a 1981 essay in *Arizona Quarterly* that before one criticizes Emerson's ability as a poet, one must make certain assumptions about his use of language: "(1) Words are signs of natural facts; (2) Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts; (3) Nature is the symbol of spirit." They argue that, for Emerson, man's perceptions are forever linked to natural reality "because nature's laws and the laws of human perception are identical." Keep this thought especially in mind while reading the last six lines of this poem.

Mollison and Walcutt also refer to Emerson's description, in his famous essay "Nature," of the optimum condition for poetry: "Man in nature, alone in the woods." Elsewhere in "Nature," Emerson writes that "the beauty of Nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation." It is easy to see how this would apply to

"The Rhodora." That single, simple plant that Emerson viewed one day lives on in his poem and is recreated in the minds of those who read it.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, Bussey uses Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem and William Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" to contrast transcendentalism with romanticism.

Emerson is as strongly associated with transcendentalism as the English poet William Wordsworth is associated with romanticism. Romanticism in England began in 1798, and the style did not dominate American literature until 1830. Transcendentalism began as a philosophical movement in Europe but blossomed into a literary movement in the United States. These two movements share a few basic ideas and beliefs, but they diverge in important areas. Comparing Emerson's "The Rhodora" and Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" affords the opportunity to examine the differences because the poems are similar in their occasions and subjects. In both cases, the speaker is wandering alone, enjoying nature, when he happens upon a flower that inspires a poetic impulse. From these very similar experiences and impulses, the two poets diverge in a way that illustrates the differences between the movements to which they belong.

In both poems, the speaker is moved by something he sees in nature. He is open to what nature has to teach and, as a result, he gains something from the experience. The theme of nature as a teacher is a traditional one in poetry, so it is not surprising that two accomplished poets such as Emerson and Wordsworth would find inspiration in nature and in the tradition of nature in poetry. Similarly, it is not surprising that both poems occur in the spring, which is another hallmark of nature poetry. But, beyond these few basic similarities, the poems are quite different from each other. Contrasting the two reveals the fundamental differences between the literary movements with which they are associated.

First, the specific subjects of the poems—the flowers—are different. Emerson writes about the rhodora, a flowering shrub native to New England. It produces multiple blooms, which appear before the shrub's leaves do. The daffodil grows from a bulb and is native to northern Europe. It produces a single flower, whose bud emerges with the leaves. Despite the fact that the daffodil only produces a single bloom, Wordsworth expands its presence by describing a "host" of them. While Emerson focuses on a single shrub, Wordsworth focuses on a field of daffodils that blanket areas beside the lake, under the trees, and beyond. Each flower is native to the poet's country.

Second, the ways in which the poets portray the flowers are altogether different, and their portrayals reveal how the poets see themselves in relation to the flowers. Emerson observes the rhodora in its natural state. He sees it in a realistic context, appreciating the beauty of its contrast to the dark, muddy surroundings. He imagines a bird coming and challenging the rhodora for outshining its red plumage. In the end, he addresses the rhodora, telling it how to answer the sages that question its hidden location. The way Emerson perceives the rhodora is consistent with the transcendentalist perspective

because he seeks wisdom in nature and relies on his intuition to bring him closer to God.

In contrast, Wordsworth employs a great deal of personification in describing the daffodils. It is not a realistic depiction of the flowers as they truly are but a portrait of them as they exist in the poet's mind. They are a "crowd" and a "host" (like angels), "tossing their heads in sprightly dance." Wordsworth assigns emotion to them, describing their glee. The speaker becomes engaged with the daffodils through sharing their perceived delight. Wordsworth writes, "A poet could not but be gay, / In such a jocund company." At the end, he writes that when he is alone, he often sees the daffodils in his mind's eye, which again brings him pleasure. The speaker has joined the daffodils and, together, they enjoy nature. Wordsworth's poem reveals the romantic imagination and reliance on emotion. He allows himself to be carried away by the moment, and he is drawn by the wildness of the daffodils rather than by the serenity that attracts Emerson to the rhodora.

Third, Emerson's experience is anchored in the past, but Wordsworth's experience encompasses the past, present, and future. For Emerson, the revelation he had through the rhodora was an intense moment that engaged his intellect. He describes what happened as he walked through the woods that day, and it is evident that he recalls the moment in the past but preserves the lesson in the present. This reflects the transcendentalist emphasis on building a deep relationship with God on a personal level. Wordsworth, however, not only recalls the experience in the past but also preserves the actual experience of joining the daffodils in the present. Further, the last stanza suggests that he plans to continue to do so in the future. After all, he will again be on his couch in a pensive mood. When he recalls the effect the daffodils had on him, his language is vibrant, bringing the reader into the experience. The speaker tells that when he is alone on his couch (in other words, indoors and far removed from the daffodils' landscape), he revisits his experience with his "inward eye" and again "dances with the daffodils." For Wordsworth, it is the feeling, not the lesson, that is most important. This emphasis is consistent with the romantic notion of immersing oneself in life and freeing the imagination and emotions. "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" represents the romantic ideal of experiencing with the heart, or emotions, while "The Rhodora" represents the transcendentalist ideal of experiencing with the mind in order to feed the spirit.

The conclusions of the two poems emphasize what their respective literary movements value most. "The Rhodora" concludes with a spiritual insight that is both humble and pious. Emerson attributes the occasion of the poem, and his reaction to the flower, to God. He sees himself as being guided by a divine force, just as the rhodora grows in that particular spot because of God's will. It is a contemplative conclusion, and it is one that presumably brings the speaker to a deeper understanding of the divine realm and his role in it. On the other hand, Wordsworth concludes with a comment about himself among the flowers. While Emerson claims that it is by God's design that he has seen the rhodora, Wordsworth claims that he goes to the daffodils of his own will by using his imagination. The emotional focus of the romantics is evident in Wordsworth's claim that his "heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with daffodils." It is his heart that directs his

experience, not his spirit. And, despite the similar occasions of the two poems and the similarities of their subjects, in the end the two poems diverge sharply. Emerson comes to a contemplative, intuitive conclusion, and Wordsworth comes to an imaginative, emotional one. Wordsworth's experience enables him to return to feelings of glee, delight, and carefree abandon. In fact, the daffodils seem to save him from just the sort of thought process that Emerson values. Wordsworth writes that when he is "in vacant or in pensive mood," the daffodils return to carry his heart away. As a transcendentalist, Emerson draws from his encounter affirmation that God is ordering the world, from a common shrub to a man seeking wisdom in nature. As a romantic, Wordsworth draws from his encounter a memory to which he can escape into pure feeling.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "The Rhodora," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #2

Prebilic is an independent author who writes and analyzes children's literature. She holds degrees in psychology and business. In this essay, Prebilic discusses how Emerson's poem embodies his spiritual fundamentals of awakening, transformation, and introspection.

Ralph Waldo Emerson published "The Rhodora" in *Poems*, the first of two volumes of poetry, in 1847. Well known for his ideas about nature's beauty, influence, and power, Emerson invokes, awakens, and transforms readers to a richer perspective. In fact, this theme of nature as a transforming agent is among the most fundamental concepts of Emerson's works. As Robert Richardson, Jr. explains in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Emerson believed that "the aim and effort of literature . . . give[s] voice to the whole of spiritual nature . . . to record in words the whole life of the world."

The foundation for "The Rhodora" lies in Emerson's belief that nature is a transforming agent. He crafts this meditative poem with precision and purpose. To fully appreciate its depth, readers can gain insight into the poem's essence by understanding Emerson.

Emerson emerged in the nineteenth century as one of the most prolific and chief influential writers and intellectuals of the era. He zealously affirmed that humans must see the beauty in nature and respect its inherent power. According to Donald Avery in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Emerson believed that "everything in nature corresponds to some state of mind." Emerson believed that nature connected the person to the all-knowing source. During a tumultuous time when states declared independence, women sought more rights, new inventions increased farm productivity, Indians lost their land, and the anti-slavery movement thrived, perhaps Emerson sought to broaden America's consciousness through a connection with nature. Whatever his motivations, Emerson cultivated these concepts not only as a lecturer and civic philosopher, but also as editor and publisher of the *Dial*, a transcendentalist journal. Emerson crafted innumerable essays, poems, and articles based on his beliefs, including "The Rhodora."

Many critics and supporters alike believe that Emerson's first work, *Nature*, formed the basis for most of his later works, including his poems. Some people dismissed *Nature*, hastily believing that it represented a doctrine identifying the divine being with the universe. However, countless others believed that his work ushered in a new era of American literature, particularly transcendentalism, a philosophical and religious movement. Some believed that "The Rhodora" gives a beautiful example of the romanticism of transcendental poetry: a poetry style that suggests an intuitive source of knowledge independent of experience. Whether one agrees with Emerson, the work itself is so beautifully written and its line of reasoning so believable, that readers cannot help but admire it.

Emerson declared in *Nature* that "Words are signs of natural facts. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. Nature is the symbol of spirit." "The

Rhodora," Emerson's sixteen- line poem, flows down the page employing natural facts: the description of this flower, its place in the woods, and its relationship to its surroundings. He wants readers to get its deeper meaning: the spiritual fundamentals of awareness, transformation, and reflection. He argues that this beauty is the art of a life-force common to both humans and nature, reaffirming that "nature is the symbol of spirit."

The poem's essence lies behind the 136 words, starting with Emerson's subtitle: "On Being Asked, Whence is the Flower?" This question convinces readers that its answer will not be simple. As he explains in *Nature*, "we have no questions . . . which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation . . . as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy." Like the curiosity that the flower awakens in one's mind, readers must trust that the order of things can satisfy.

The poem's introduction reflects on the origin of the flower. "Whence," an introspective word inquiring about origin, prompts a meditative journey. The use of whence has evoked conflict for centuries, although Emerson may not have known the full extent of its debate in his day. Since the fourteenth century, reputable writers used "from whence," especially in biblical writing. In the eighteenth century, intellectuals criticized "from whence" as redundant. By the nineteenth century, perhaps Emerson employed whence to create redundancy. This repetition, something critics have noted in Emerson's writing, may have pierced his ideas into readers' attentiveness.

Emerson opens "The Rhodora" by describing an awakening to the beauty of nature: "In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes, / I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods, / Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook, / To please the desert and the sluggish brook." In Emerson's New England home, this deciduous shrub grows about three feet tall and produces delicate rose-purple, two-lipped flowers that bloom in the spring before or with its leaves. A natural, unplanned wind penetrates the symbolic solitude of winter. It announces the eruption of spring. As Emerson describes in *Nature*, "to go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society." As the poet lets the sea-winds pierce the consciousness and its chamber, spring jolts the poet into a new awareness. The poet sees the fresh flowers in the woods. The attentiveness rouses the soul.

As the poet examines the shrub, the awakening intensifies. The leafless blooms spread in a damp nook; Emerson alludes to the idea that this location pleases both the desert and the brook. It symbolizes a fitting in, a desire to belong, much like the way new people gently settle into an established neighborhood. The people, like the flowers, seek the basic elements to live comfortably and yearn for a place to grow. They nudge at the existing hierarchy to establish their roots and hope to make new friends. This awakening to the new place represents the first of Emerson's spiritual fundamentals.

Emerson could best illustrate transformation, his second spiritual fundamental, if he allowed himself to experience it. Emerson's surroundings gave him the courage to transform. As Richardson notes, Emerson "was at the center of much that was new,

exciting, and vital in American cultural life" in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s. Richardson also observes that "in religion, in philosophy, and in literature, the group around Emerson was liberal, learned, forward- looking and reform-minded." Surrounded by an encouraging community and devoted family, Emerson allowed new ideas to enter his mind and he created the words to express them. As a result, he impacted the world with his ideals and left a living legacy. This foundation gave him the fundamentals that he needed to welcome and seek transformation. Once he could transform himself, he could share his experience with others in his writing.

The next verse develops this concept of transformation: "The purple petals fallen in the pool, / Made the black water with their beauty gay; / Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool, / And court the flower that cheapens his array." Awakened to nature's beauty, the poet notices things previously unseen. The beautiful petals transform the appearance of the small body of still water, the pool. This deep or still place in the stream serves as the background for the purple petals, creating an unexpectedly brilliant and colorful scene. The male red-bird, with its bright red body, black wings and tail, usually draws the attention of the observer. Yet, its spectacular array fades next to the purple flowers. The red-bird at the pool no longer contains the same influence that it did before. The natural facts have led to a spiritual fact; these new events have changed the observer's perception.

To Emerson, beauty exists for pleasure. Emerson believed, as he expresses in "Nature," "a nobler want of man is served by nature, namely, the love of beauty." He saw beauty as the "constitution of all things . . . the primary forms, as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight in and for themselves; a pleasure arising from outline, color, motion, and grouping." Emerson draws on this core belief in the next verse: "Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why / This charm is wasted on the earth and sky, / Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing, / Then Beauty is its own excuse for being."

When sages, people respected for experience, judgment, and wisdom, ask the rhodora why beautiful flowers squander their delightfulness only to be seen by earth and sky, Emerson answers. He asserts that just as human beings use eyes to see, beauty is there to be seen. The harmony of form or color, truthfulness, and originality serve as the excuse. Emerson holds the beauty of nature so reverently, that he applies the term dear when conversing with the rhodora. Dear identifies the flower as highly valued, something he is fond of, like a sweetheart.

The culmination of the poem shows the natural introspection that follows a transformation: "Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose! / I never thought to ask, I never knew; / But, in my simple ignorance, suppose / The self-same Power that brought me there brought you." For the first time, the poet wonders why the rhodora appeared in that place and at that time. With reflection and with the want of knowledge, the poet assumes that precisely the same strength or force that brought the rhodora brought the poet. Many critics assume that this last verse references a deity. Perhaps. Yet, as Robert Richardson Jr. describes in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Emerson, a deeply religious man, believed that one should "not turn to God, not to the state, not to society

or to history . . . but to nature" for an understanding of spirit. Emerson alludes that because the poet knows no newer knowledge and that the self-same power brought both to be there. Whether the identical power comes from a religious affiliation or a doctrine that a deity does not exist, Emerson believes that nature is the symbol of spirit. Through introspection, the third of Emerson's spiritual fundamentals, the question gets answered for each individual.

In this simple poem, Emerson gave readers a multifaceted illustration of his three spiritual principles: awareness, transformation, and introspection. Yet, he could only do that if he achieved these principles in his life. Much like the elements of nature, the soil, water, sun, and shade that nurtured the rhodora to blossom, Emerson created his own foundation. As Wilfred McClay observes in *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, "no man is an island. . . . Emerson's brand of heroic individualism silently . . . took utterly for granted . . . a wide range of social, institutional, cultural, and moral supports provided by the family and community life" in which he lived. The social resources that Emerson relied upon allowed him not only to become the man people study today, but also the quiet soul that transformed his language into magnificent poetry, a legacy of which "The Rhodora" takes part.

Source: Michelle Prebilic, Critical Essay on "The Rhodora," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Yoder divulges Emerson's poetic influences and discusses themes within "The Rhodora" that are echoed in his essays.

An exhaustive study would show how Emerson moved from an undergraduate's imitation of Augustan couplets to a variety of less polished and less constraining verse forms□ballads, epigram- matic quatrains, Wordsworthian blank verse in 1827, and the extraordinary if ungainly "Gnothi Seauton" of 1831, lines that are as unorthodox in form as they are in doctrine, and that prefigure Emerson's settled practices of a decade later. Emerson was not, however, consciously preparing himself for a poetic career. The role of his journal poetry is unquestionably self-expression, dialogue with oneself□moving away from the style of performance toward a means of formulating one's private convictions, or, as Leslie Fiedler has suggested, toward "the speech of a man urging himself on, rather than appealing to a crowd." To summarize these early experiments we may say that Emerson sought a mode of expression appropriate to the essentially meditative aim of this writing. Not surprisingly, he turned finally to Wordsworth, whose star was just rising on this side of the Atlantic in the late 1820's, and to the Metaphysical tradition of meditative verse, especially to the poetry of George Herbert.

"The River," dated June 1827 in the Centenary Edition, and the following lines from Emerson's journal are unmistakably Wordsworthian in setting and cadence:

He is a man who tho' he told it not
Mourned in the hour of manhood, while he saw
The rich imagination that had tinged
Each earthly thing with hues from paradise
/Abandoning/ /Forsake/ forever his instructed eye.
□
But he was poor & proud & solitary
He would walk forth at moonlight, for the moon
And quick eyed stars do sympathize with all
Who suffer □
When thy soul
Is filled with a just image fear not thou
Lest halting rhymes or unharmonious verse
Cripple the fair Conception. Leave the heart
Alone to find its language. In all tongues
It hath a sovereign instinct that doth teach
An eloquence which rules can never give.

Associated with Wordsworth's rural solitary is a language sincere and unpretentious, that comes spontaneously from the heart. Emerson's admiration for Herbert over a period of at least seven years culminates in the 1835 lectures, where Herbert is placed foremost among English poets: "I should cite Herbert as a striking example of the power of exalted thought to melt and bend language to its fit expression." Undoubtedly in

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Herbert—in the "Jordan" poems, for example— Emerson also found an ideal of simple, heartfelt poetry. Herbert's contribution is larger, however, for Herbert provided a model, not merely for simplicity of speech and imagery, but for combining that simplicity with architectonic skill, with the concentrated and integrated organization that distinguishes the seventeenth-century meditative style, just as it distinguishes Emerson's poetry of 1834 from the prosaic, discursive blank verse and free verse that dots his journals between 1827 and 1832. "Each and All," "The Rhodora," and "The Snow-Storm" are among the most admired of Emerson's poems. What they owe to Herbert is not explicit, but the debt is clear enough in another poem probably written about this time and later taken for Herbert's own work.

"Grace"
How much, preventing God, how much I owe
To the defences thou hast round me set;
Example, custom, fear, occasion slow,—
These scorned bondmen were my parapet.
I dare not peep over this parapet
To gauge with glance the roaring gulf below,
The depths of sin to which I had descended,
Had not these me against myself defended.

Here, as John Broderick has shown, is a direct parallel with the first line of Herbert's "Sinne," "Lord! with what care hast thou begirt us round," Moreover, the retard effected by the naming or cataloging device in the third line is characteristic of Herbert and may also have been taken over from the catalog somewhat more extended in "Sinne" (though cataloging is a common enough technique among seventeenth-century poets, and Emerson may have found precedents in Milton, Herrick, or even the American William Bradford). Personification of the defenses as "scorned bondmen" calls to mind Herbert's specific recommendation that "things of ordinary use" ought to illustrate "Heavenly Truths." This advice Emerson never forgot; the bondmen of "Grace" reappear constantly in his poetry, importing truths well above their station. The "drudge in dusty frock" who appears in "Art" has been compared to Herbert's servant in "The Elixir," a poem that Emerson especially admired, and the stooped crones who sweep and scour the poet's cottage in "Saadi" are suddenly transformed into gods. Thus there is no doubt about Herbert's influence. More generally—and here I think we can include the poems of 1834 as having the same qualities— Emerson learned from Herbert, and perhaps from some of his contemporaries, the art of "neatness": the way to structure a poem on a single metaphor or situation, the way "Grace" is based on the figure of a fortress; the smoothness of tone and rhythm, conversational but always melodic, never jagged but sufficiently pointed and varied to gain the quality of speech, as in the catalog or in the stressed pronouns ("these me") which give the last line of "Grace" a peak before it falls off to the diminished feminine ending.

"The Rhodora", one of the 1834 poems, displays the same neat structure and rhythm as "Grace," again modulated by a feminine rhyme that sets off the gnomic couplet, and by the deliberateness of the last line with its hyphenated adjective, monosyllabic parallelism, and pointed pronouns. "The Rhodora" conveys, too, the humility and

intense dedication that Emerson and Herbert shared. One might go further to argue that Emerson's poem deploys the formal structure of seventeenth-century meditation, beginning with the composition or focusing upon a concrete situation and proposing or the spiritual problem therein dramatized; following with an analysis of the problem; and ending in the colloquy, an intimate conversation and union between the poet and the object of his spiritual exercise. But here I think the essential difference between Emerson and the Metaphysicals is evident: whereas the meditative formula is triadic, the structure of "The Rhodora" is clearly binary, two sets of eight lines each. In the first, the situation is posed and the question implied (actually stated already in the subtitle of the poem); in the second, an answer is given immediately, without any deliberation, and the answer itself eschews analysis:

Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being:
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!
I never thought to ask, I never knew:
But, in my simple ignorance, suppose
The self-same Power that brought me there
brought you.

The rhodora needs no reasoned argument, no "excuse" for its existence. In terms of the meditative formula, we have only "composition" and "colloquy," two parts subtly intertwined. The first part of the poem portrays the rhodora as a humble, selfsacrificing flower which, though equal to the celebrated rose, prefers obscure service to worldly fame. Sacrifice and service are implied, almost to the point of martyrdom, in the fallen petals. In the last eight lines the poet identifies himself with the same Christian virtues: his "simple ignorance" is faith, if not in Providence, certainly in a wise and sensitive Creator; the worshipful humility which the poet and the flower share explains their intimate rapport. The philosophical sages, on the other hand, are shut out; as the flower leans toward Christian sacrifice, the sages are associated with selfseeking, utilitarian interests, perhaps even cavalier interests, who see the flower's charm as "wasted." Thus a dramatic undercurrent□the subtle alliance of poet and flower against the sages□helps to create a mood of religious dedication that excludes the inquiring, analytical mind, and at the same time militates against a narrowly esthetic, "beauty for beauty's sake" interpretation of the poem.

In a number of ways "The Rhodora" is consonant with Emerson's achievement in *Nature* (1836). Both works illustrate the attention to structure, the eye for neatness and symmetry, that Emerson cultivated during these years. Herbert, probably Emerson's chief model for the poetry of 1834, is also one of the inspiring spirits of *Nature*, where a large portion of "Man" is quoted. There is a well-known passage concluding the section of *Nature* on "Beauty" that bears out the message of "The Rhodora": "This element [Beauty] I call an ultimate end. No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe.

God is the all-fair." Finally, the binary structure of the poem reflects, in its omission of any extended analysis, Emerson's attack on the Understanding in *Nature*.

More generally, the binary form is a model for Emerson's philosophical inquiry and for the dramatic situation he used to symbolize it. The "Introduction" to *Nature* defines the terms of his inquiry: "Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul." Emerson took as a starting point the post-Kantian idealists' distinction between consciousness and otherness, the ME and the NOT ME, and this initial dualism colors all of his writings. Nature or the NOT ME, taken as a whole, is conceived as a problem to be solved, and in 1836, at least, Emerson expressed utter confidence that the solution is at hand:

Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are
unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the
creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity
the order of things has awakened in our minds, the
order of things can satisfy. Every man's condition is
a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would
put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth.
In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and tendencies,
describing its own design.

Confidence in the "order of things," and faith in the "like manner" that bridges the gap between man and nature: here, in an incipient version, is the doctrine of correspondence that supports Emerson's early Romanticism. This correspondence is the hidden alliance between the poet and the rhodora, which makes them both responsive to sentiments of beauty and sacrifice. Much of Emerson's poetry thus resolves itself into a binary, questionand- answer form, often dramatized as an wencounter between the poet and Nature personified as a whole or symbolized by a single object, a tree, stream, or mountain. According to Emerson's early faith, the poet needs only to put the question and Nature will awaken in him the answer. He does not analyze, nor does he require any formal discipline of meditation□he "apprehends," in an instant he grasps the truth of what he has already acted out. The spontaneity of true insight is one of Emerson's Romantic axioms:

A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam
of light which flashes across his mind from within,
more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and
sages. ("Self-Reliance")
The only mode of obtaining an answer to these questions
of the senses is to forego all low curiosity, and,
accepting the tide of being which floats us into the
secret of nature, work and live, work and live, and
all unawares the advancing soul has built and forged
for itself a new condition, and the question and the
answer are one. ("The Over-Soul,")

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Source: R. A. Yoder, "Toward the 'Titmouse Dimension': The Development of Emerson's Poetic Style," in *PMLA*, Vol. 87, No. 2, March 1972, pp. 255-70.

Topics for Further Study

Many scholars consider the poet e. e. cummings a transcendentalist, even though he is a more modern poet than Emerson and his contemporaries. Review cummings's work, along with his background, his views on poetry, and criticism of his work. Stage a debate with a classmate in which one of you claims that cummings is a transcendentalist and the other claims that he is not.

The English poet Matthew Arnold accused Emerson of being overly vague in his poetry. He claimed that Emerson left too much to the reader, forcing him or her to guess at the meanings of symbols and allusions. Write a position paper in which you use "The Rhodora" either to support or to counter Arnold's criticism.

The rhodora is a native shrub in New England. Choose a plant or flower native to your part of the country and compose a poem about it. You may adopt the transcendentalist point of view or you may choose another way of interpreting the plant's significance.

Examine Emerson's use of color in the poem. Find a work of art that you would use in a textbook to illustrate the poem. Create a one-page layout, including the poem and its title, the illustration, and a caption.

Compare and Contrast

1800s: A growing women's movement is working for equal rights, including the right to vote. Activist and social reformer Sarah Grimke publishes her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Conditions of Woman*. Margaret Fuller establishes discussion groups for women in Boston. Activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton praise Fuller for supporting women's right to full participation in society.

Today: As a result of the tireless efforts of early advocates for women's rights, women today have the right to vote, own property independently, own and operate businesses, hold public office, and advance in the work place. While there are still areas of disparity (such as national pay averages), women have strong legal foundations for asserting their rights.

1800s: Transcendentalism, which borrows some elements of Eastern philosophies and religions, takes hold in Massachusetts and influences many American intellectuals and writers.

Today: Yoga is increasingly popular throughout the United States. Yoga, the Sanskrit word for "union," is a philosophy that was first systematized by the Indian sage Patanjali. The various schools of yoga taught today have some commonalities with transcendentalism, such as the beliefs that each individual soul is directly linked to God and that truth is everywhere present in creation and that truth can be experienced intuitively, rather than rationally. While millions of Americans practice only one element of yoga□its regimen of physical postures and exercises□ a growing number are adopting the broader philosophy and its more mystical practices, such as meditation.

1800s: Transcendentalist poetry presents challenging new ideas but adheres to certain traditions of form and content. Emerson, for example, writes with a rhyme scheme and often draws on nature for inspiration and themes.

Today: Stephen Dunn wins the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for poetry for his collection entitled *Different Hours*. Dunn writes in free verse, using familiar imagery from everyday life. Still, his poetry can be difficult to interpret because the themes are very subtle.

What Do I Read Next?

Emerson's "Self-Reliance" in his *Essays* (1841) is considered one of the most important works to come out of the transcendentalist movement. In this essay, Emerson extols the virtues of solitude and independent thinking.

Richard Geldard's *God in Concord: Ralph Waldo Emerson's Awakening to the Infinite* (1998) presents Emerson's spiritual journals to demonstrate how his understanding of God and spirituality changed as he matured. Geldard sets out to show how Emerson came to be regarded as a spiritual leader.

Edited by Joel Myerson, *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (2000), is an anthology of key transcendentalist writings reflecting the ideology of the movement and its presence in New England society. Readers will find essays, poems, correspondence, and book excerpts by well-known and lesser-known writers.

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) is a classic transcendentalist work. This book records the author's time at Walden Pond, where he went to be alone and to live simply and deliberately. The book includes both philosophical writing and minute details about Thoreau's daily life.

Further Study

Heilmeyer, Marina, *The Language of Flowers: Symbols and Myths*, Prestel, 2001.

Heilmeyer considers thirty-five different flowers, describing their historical importance, their symbolic meanings to different people and cultures, and their presence in literature. The book includes more than one hundred illustrations to enhance the text.

Myerson, Joel, ed., *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Historical Guides to American Authors series, Oxford University Press, 1999.

In addition to extensive biographical information, this book includes essays by various authors exploring Emerson's philosophies, views on society, and beliefs about literature. Readers will also find information about the historical and social context for Emerson's life in New England.

Porte, Joel, and Saundra Morris, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

This volume is a good critical introduction to Emerson's wide-ranging work. Contributors evaluate Emerson's poetry, essays, and articles, providing a variety of viewpoints on the works themselves and on how they influenced the literary world. The editors include a chronology and a bibliography.

Rowe, John Carlos, *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature*, Columbia University Press, 1996.

Beginning with Emerson, Rowe examines the political positions held by many of America's most prominent literary figures. Rowe focuses on abolition and women's rights, as these were the dominant political issues of the nineteenth century. Rowe writes about Emerson, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain.

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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 memberseducational professionals helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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