The Room Study Guide

The Room by Conrad Aiken

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Conrad Aiken's □The Room,□ collected in *John Deth and Other Poems* and published in 1930, symbolically remembers and transforms Aiken's parents' deaths. It focuses on the dark and troubled struggle between chaos and order that was, for Aiken, the source of his creativity, and it proclaims his conviction (as quoted by Catharine F. Seigel in her article for *Literature and Medicine*) that □death and birth [are] inseparably interlocked.□ The poem also reflects the intellectual currents of its time. It presents aspects of psychological phenomena described in Freudian literature, like repression and displacement, and it uses mythic, or archetypal, imagery and a theory of recurrent cycles like those that were explored by the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. Aiken represents emotional states and psychic phenomena using images that suggest those states. □The Room□ is available in Aiken's *Collected Poems* (1953; 2nd ed., 1970), published by Oxford University Press.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1889

Deathdate: 1973

Conrad Aiken was born in Savannah, Georgia, on August 5, 1889, the eldest of four children. When Aiken was eleven, his father, a physician and a poet, murdered his wife and then turned the pistol on himself. Seeing the blood-soaked bodies, Aiken went to the police station for help. After their parents' burial, the children were separated. Aiken was sent to Massachusetts to live with his father's sister's family.

When Aiken entered Harvard in 1907, he had already begun writing poetry; in 1911 he was named Class Poet. At Harvard he met T. S. Eliot (1885-1965). Together they edited the *Advocate*, a magazine of poetry and criticism. The friendship begun at Harvard, despite a period of estrangement when Eliot embraced Anglicanism and distanced himself from those who did not, lasted throughout their lives. Aiken was a contributing editor to Eliot's magazine the *Dial* between 1917 and 1919.

In 1912, Aiken married Jessie McDonald; the couple had three children. In 1917, his first book of poems, *Nocturne of Remembered Spring*, was published. *The Charnel Rose* followed in 1918. In 1919, the Aikens left Cambridge, Massachusetts, and moved to South Yarmouth, England. In 1920, Aiken published *House of Dust: A Symphony*. In 1921, the family moved to London. There Aiken became the U.S. correspondent for the *Athenaeum* and the *London Mercury*. In 1924, he bought a house in Winchelsea, a village in East Sussex, England, which he kept until 1947. Aiken returned to Boston in 1926 without his family. There he met Clarissa Lorenz, who became his second wife, after he divorced Jessie McDonald in 1929. In 1927, his first novel, partly autobiographical, *Blue Voyage*, appeared, and he became a tutor in English at Harvard.

In 1929, Aiken received the Shelley Memorial Award and, in 1930, the Pulitzer Prize for his *Selected Poems*. That same year, he published *John Deth and Other Poems*, in which □The Room□ first appeared. In 1930, too, Aiken returned to London with Clarissa. He attempted suicide by turning on the gas in his flat in 1932, but Clarissa, returning home from the movies early, rescued him. From 1933 through 1936, Aiken was the London correspondent for the *New Yorker*. In 1936, he met Mary Hoover, a painter, and married her in 1937, immediately after his divorce from Clarissa. In England, they ran a summer school for writers and painters.

Toward the end of September 1939, with the outbreak of World War II in Europe, the Aikens sailed for New York and settled in Brewster, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. From 1950 to 1952, Aiken was a Fellow in American Letters and occupied the Chair of Poetry at the Library of Congress. In 1952, his autobiographical novel *Ushant* appeared. In 1953, his *Collected Poems* was published and won the National Book Award. In 1956,

he garnered the Bollingen Prize for poetry. He received the Gold Medal in Poetry from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1958 and the National Medal for Literature in 1969. In his lifetime he published more than fifty volumes of poetry, fiction, and criticism. In 1962, Aiken returned to Savannah and lived there in the house next door to his childhood home and, during most summers, in Brewster, Massachusetts, until his death in Savannah on August 17, 1973, at the age of eighty-four.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-5

□The Room□ begins with the speaker telling of a past struggle, which took place in a particular but unidentified room. As if pointing, he says, □Through that window . . . I saw the struggle□□a □struggle / Of darkness against darkness□ in which the darkness □turned and turned□ and □dived downward.□ Everything besides the speaker and the window now is gone, □all else being extinct / Except itself [the window] and me.□ No reason is given for the struggle or its origin, history, or circumstances.

The insight the speaker gains from seeing the struggle is that he □saw / How order might□if chaos wished□become□□that is, how order can come into being out of chaos. Chaos is depicted as having potential: order might come into existence □if chaos wished.□

Lines 6-11

In this section, the speaker traces the way chaos is transformed into order. He □saw the darkness crush upon itself, / Contracting powerfully.□ The energy that had been diffuse in struggle draws in upon itself and by contraction becomes concentrated. Contraction is a kind of suicide filled with pain: □It was as if / It killed itself, slowly: and with much pain. / Pain. The scene was pain, and nothing but pain.□ Only pain is left to the speaker from the struggle. Then comes the insight and a miraculous gift: □What else□ can there be but pain □when chaos draws all forces inward / To shape a single leaf?□ The leaf appears as abruptly and surprisingly in the poem as it does in the room.

Destruction is a dynamic struggle of dark forces spiraling downward and imploding; creation is presented as an image resulting from that struggle: a leaf. The potential energy of the struggle, concentrated by contraction, is converted to kinetic energy, to energy in motion, by the will of the speaker, exercised in pain, and bursts into something structured: □a single leaf.□

Lines 12-18

Beginning with the image of the single, unattached leaf, the speaker presents the creative process as deriving a structure from an idea or a vision. Destruction is represented by implosion; creation is described as a process of uniting parts until an encompassing and order-giving whole is achieved. The leaf does not grow on a tree rising from a seed. It appears as a free-floating vision that the speaker has to work from to create a complete structure. □After a while,□ from that leaf, □the twig□ that connects the leaf to the bough □shot downward from it.□ And then □from the twig a bough; and then the trunk, / Massive and coarse; and last the one black root.□ Anchoring comes last: creation, the process of opening outward after implosion, is delicate and tentative.

Reversing the contraction, this process of expansion breaks the boundaries of the room, goes beyond the speaker's boundaries: "The black root cracked the walls. Boughs burst the window / The great tree took possession."

Lines 19-25

The final section of the poem confronts the new chaos. "Tree of trees!" the speaker cries in triumph, as if it were the very tree of life he has created. But, he continues, warning, "Remember (when time comes) how chaos died / To shape the shining leaf." As Aiken wrote later in a letter to a friend, "death and birth [are] inseparably interlocked." Life and death, order and chaos are embedded in each other and change into each other. After order, chaos returns.

With restored life comes time and, thus, memory. Memory forces the speaker beyond the bounds of the newly ordered present back to the chaos of the struggle. Memory renews the pain of grief. Earlier, in line 9, the speaker had avoided experiencing grief by attributing pain to "the scene" rather than experiencing it as his own response. Now he accepts it. Addressing the tree, which he describes in a humanized form and, therefore, as an embodiment of himself, he says, "Then turn, have courage, / Wrap arms and roots together, be convulsed / With grief, and bring back chaos out of shape." Let order, he is saying, show as much of a will in confronting chaos as he had earlier attributed to chaos when he wrote that "order might . . . become" "if chaos wished" it. The cycle continues.

The speaker ends with a vow that he will keep an awareness of the partiality of each phase, chaos and order, for neither by itself is the unity. The whole is composed of both. "I will be watching then," when chaos returns, he says, "as I watch now. / I will praise darkness now," at a time of brightness, not forgetting darkness. "But then," when chaos is come again, remembering the role of chaos in creation, he will praise "the leaf" and thereby not succumb to chaos.

Themes

Memory

The power of memory and the nature of memory are underlying themes of □The Room.□ The poem begins with a recollection that represents both active and repressed memory, a memory the speaker has pushed down into unconsciousness. □Through that window . . . I saw,□ the speaker begins. He is recounting something that happened but that has remained in his memory only as a mythic image of □the struggle / Of darkness against darkness.□ The work of the poem involves the speaker in freeing himself through the act of creation from the weight of the memory he has pushed down. In creating, he can experience the emotion attached to that buried memory. Even after succeeding, the speaker reminds himself not to forget either the grief he has experienced or the process of creation he has accomplished. □Remember,□ he says to himself, □how chaos died / To shape the shining leaf.□

Repression

In □The Room,□ the speaker emphasizes the intensity of the pain involved in the event he is recalling by an insistent repetition of the word □pain.□ He does not say, □The scene was painful to me.□ Instead, he says, □Pain. The scene was pain, and nothing but pain.□ Nevertheless, the event that caused so much pain is never remembered specifically but only as it has been converted into a mythic □struggle / Of darkness against darkness.□ Transforming the memory of the situation into abstract, dreamlike images allows the speaker to recognize emotion without actually experiencing it. Acknowledging the existence of emotion without experiencing the emotion directly or attaching it to a specific event suggests the psychological process of repression. Repression can result when a situation is too overwhelming to be kept in conscious awareness but too strong to be entirely forgotten and ignored. The result is what Aiken describes. An intense feeling can be represented by an image, but no corresponding reason can be given for that feeling.

Chaos and Order

In □The Room,□ Aiken claims that chaos and order, while seeming to be opposites, actually depend upon each other and are phases of a recurring cycle. Each contains within it the seeds of the other. Aiken presents chaos as a contraction of dark energy in a death struggle with itself. He also shows that the force of that struggle releases creative energy and results in the development of a new order. By giving chaos volition, or the power of choice, in line 5 (□if chaos wished□), the poet gives chaos a human attribute, personifies it and makes it, thus, an attribute of himself. He then ascribes his wish to chaos. Consequently, he gains the power to fashion order, as a poet, out of chaos. The sudden presence of the leaf in the room, in line 11, represents the

mysterious way creation happens. The poem arises in the speaker's mind in the same way from its terrible source. The painful, destructive contraction of struggling dark energy explodes in creation, described in line 17. "The black root cracked the walls. Boughs burst the window." The poem itself bursts the order the speaker created for himself in composing it and brings a new threat of chaos by restoring the full memory of the event it memorializes. That order, as it fulfills its potential, overflows its boundaries and reintroduces chaos. As in nature, there is a continuous shift back and forth between birth and death. Each is necessary for the other.

Courage

Emotion is experienced as something dangerous in "The Room" because it is associated with a struggle that is painful for the speaker to remember. Nevertheless, he pushes himself through a recollection of the experience, even though he has translated it into mythic, or archetypal, terms. The reward is that the experience becomes his to use creatively rather than the source of an emotion that torments him. After he has created the poem, which is represented by the leaf and the tree that follows it, he understands that he will still have to encounter the grief he had tried to avoid. When he does so, he will again be cast into chaos. But he presses himself to have courage, and he defines what courage is. It is the ability to endure the situation that confronts him, and to rejoice in it, no matter what—to praise darkness during periods of order and to praise order during periods of chaos. He calls upon himself to have the courage to be rooted in time by experience and to transcend time through art.

The Craft of Poetry

The craft of poetry itself is an implicit theme of "The Room." By writing the poem, the speaker confronts a buried experience, excavates it, and transforms the raw material of chaos into a work of art. The poem, like the leaf that symbolizes it, is the consequence of a terrible event and serves as a memorial to that event and to the speaker's ability to bring order to a chaotic event that threatened to destroy him. The leaf is an image for the poem itself, which the poet drew from the chaos. A leaf, besides being the green growth on a tree, is also a sheet of paper. Written down upon a sheet of paper the poem is given tangible and enduring form. The speaker-as-poet's art is both the symbol of the enlightenment he drew from the darkness he encountered and the means of drawing it.

Style

Blank Verse

□The Room□ is written in blank verse, meaning that there is no fixed rhyme scheme. Most of the lines do not rhyme at all, but they all are pentameter lines, meaning that they are made up of five feet, and each foot has two beats to it. Usually, as is common in English, the rhythm of each foot is iambic, or made up of iambs, meaning that the stress in each foot falls on the second beat. But Aiken's use of iambic pentameter is not absolute. Look at the first line for an example of five varied feet (with the capitalization indicating the stress): □through THAT / WINdow / all ELSE / Being / exTINCT.□ The second and fourth feet reverse the pattern, giving an emphasis to the words. They are in a meter called trochaic, which is made up of trochees. A trochee is composed of one stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one.

Although the verse of □The Room□ is unrhymed, the last words of each line carry a significant amount of weight. Consider the final words of the first five lines: □extinct,□ □struggle,□ □room,□ □saw,□ and □become.□ These words are central to the situation the poem recounts. An *extinct struggle*, which the speaker *saw* in a *room* (the title of the poem), is at the root of what will *become*. Lines 8 and 9 set the all-important word □pain□ to rhyme with itself. But the rhyme becomes more like the pounding of tympani when the word □pain□ appears twice again before the rhyme closes. Three lines later, at the end of line 12, which is an extension of a shortened line 11, the word □pain□ is echoed by the word □came,□ an inexact rhyming, called a slant rhyme. In the next line, slant rhyming continues with the word □room□ again. From □pain□ to □came□ to □room□ the rhyming traces the process the poem celebrates, the transformation in the room of painful chaos into a leaf. In the last section, once again, the words at the end of each line recapitulate and illuminate the text of the poem.

Imagism

In 1912, the American poet Ezra Pound introduced the term □imagism□ to describe a kind of poetry that he characterized as being fashioned out of precise and concrete visual images. Instead of stating directly an idea or a feeling, by the use of images a poet could suggest ideas and feelings, which readers could discover and experience for themselves. Rather than having the grandeur, sonority, and scope of Victorian poetry, imagism sought to have the poet present precise subject matter, briefly and sharply defined through appropriate corresponding images and plain language. Aiken, along with Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, D. H. Lawrence, and T. S. Eliot, was influenced by imagism and incorporated its aesthetic into his poetry. In □The Room,□ Aiken uses imagist techniques, representing states of mind and emotional conditions through particular images presented in unadorned language. Brutal conflict is seen, for example, as the struggle of two darknesses in a room. Similarly, order and creation are represented by the appearance of a single leaf and the parts of a tree.

Historical Context

Sigmund Freud and Psychoanalysis

In 1934, Aiken was asked whether he had been influenced by Sigmund Freud (1857-1939), the Viennese physician and founder of psychoanalysis, and how he regarded him. He responded (as Catharine F. Seigel quotes in her article for *Literature and Medicine*), □Profoundly, . . . I decided very early . . . that Freud, and his co-workers and rivals and followers, were making the most important contribution of the century to the understanding of man and his consciousness.□ With the formulation of psychoanalytic theory, Freud changed the map of human understanding. Drawing on the story of Oedipus, the Theban king who unwittingly murdered his father and married his mother, Freud constructed a model of the human psyche that proposed that consciousness was only the surface aspect of a person's mental apparatus. Freud identified and charted a realm beneath conscious awareness that he called the unconscious. The unconscious is the realm in which great residues of the events that people experience, but that are no longer available to them, are buried. Freud often compared the unconscious to the hidden, historic layers of a city, like Rome, which can be uncovered only through archaeological digs.

This buried material can affect a person in a disturbing way, for it has a tendency to reappear. Rather than affecting someone directly, it makes its existence felt indirectly through what Freud called symptoms. Symptoms are distorted expressions of the buried material, material of which the person has become unaware through a process of forgetting Freud called repression. When those symptoms are properly understood□that is, correctly interpreted□they reveal the repressed material. Repressed material is composed of experiences that have been too painful to hold in consciousness. When that repressed material is recovered and revealed for what it is and the painful emotions associated with it are fully experienced, Freud argued, the symptoms disappear.

Archetypal Myths

One of Freud's most important early followers, Carl Jung (1875-1961), a Swiss psychoanalyst, broke with Freud and became the head of what is often seen as a rival school of psychoanalysis. One of Jung's major theories and one that is of interest to Aiken's readers is the concept of archetypes, or original patterns, models, or myths. Jung believed that there are eternal images and processes built into the human psyche that constantly reappear in literary and cultural forms. These archetypes are representations in images of both individual events in a person's lifetime and shared psychic functions and beliefs in what Jung called a collective unconscious, which links all of humankind together at the deepest level.

The idea of the interdependency of order and chaos is one of these archetypes, or original patterns. So are the related archetypes of expansion and contraction and of

birth and death. These interconnections are seen not only in the natural cycle of the seasons, in the vegetation cycle, in the rhythm of the breath, or in the phenomenon of childbirth, but they are also seen in such a mythic figure as the phoenix, the firebird that burns itself to ashes every five hundred years and then springs to life again from those ashes. Ideas of death and resurrection, of life emerging from death, as well as death following life, are also central to the Christian story. The myth of the dying and reviving god is a widely held belief in many religions that preceded Christianity. Stories of sacrifice that assure the continuation of life or the soothing of nature are also widespread. Many folktales tell of the yearly sacrifice of chosen youths to a monster to ensure the continuing safety of a community. Many early peoples practiced actual or symbolic sacrifices in order to ensure good harvests or good hunting. These all embody the archetypal connection between chaos and order, destruction and creation, and life and death.

Modernism

The literary movement called modernism, which emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century and of which Aiken was a part, shifted emphasis from the external world that the writer perceived to the internal process of perception and, consequently, to the psyche of the writer. The literature produced was less concerned with logical form, organization, and structure, all of which were characteristic of nineteenth-century writing, than with the spontaneous images that impressed themselves upon the writer's imagination. Explaining modernist technique through an analysis of the writing of James Joyce, the author of *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), herself a great modernist, wrote, □Joyce . . . is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its message through the brain, and in order to preserve it he disregards . . . whatever to him seems adventitious, whether it be probability, or coherence or any other of the signposts which for generations have served to support the imagination of the reader.□

Critical Overview

According to Catharine F. Seigel, writing in □Conrad Aiken and the Seduction of Suicide,□ □one would be hard pressed to name another U.S. writer of the first half of the twentieth century [besides Aiken] who so nearly satisfied T. S. Eliot's famous conditions for literary greatness: abundance, variety, and complete competence.□ Yet Aiken is more esteemed by poets and critics than he is popular among readers. As Seigel says, Louis Untermeyer wrote an article in the *Saturday Review* in 1967 titled □Conrad Aiken: Our Best Known Unread Poet.□ Fifteen years before that, Seigel also says, the critic Mark Schorer, writing in the *Nation*, called the critical neglect of Aiken's work □a conspiracy of silence.□

Perhaps the main reason for this is that Aiken has been out of step with one of the fundamental aesthetic principles that governed poetry in the twentieth century, as formulated by T. S. Eliot in his essay □Tradition and the Individual Talent□: □The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.□ All of Aiken's work, quite to the contrary, is a continuous, even obsessive, combing through and exploitation of the harrowing primal events of his life. He constantly attempts to find universals in his own particulars and to transform his personal trauma into literature. Yet Aiken, despite his poetry's concern with autobiography, always remained behind his poetry. He did not have the temperament to be a celebrity poet.

Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, R. P. Blackmur says Aiken's □work [is] in a continuous relation to the chaos of [his] sensibilit[y] . . . and each separate poem issues with a kind of random spontaneity.□ Writing in the *Georgia Review* shortly after Aiken's death, Calvin S. Brown pays tribute to Aiken and also touches upon what makes his poetry sometimes difficult: □This poetry exhibits an astonishing variety of forms and types. Beginning with narrative verse, he soon reduced the narrative element to a mere scaffolding□often perilously flimsy□to support an investigation of the minds and inner lives of his characters.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Neil Heims is a writer and teacher living in Paris. In this essay, he discusses the problem of how to use a poet's biography in the interpretation of his work.

A recurring problem for anyone who reads poetry and wants to understand it is the problem of determining what information about a poem is useful in the interpretation of the poem and where the information might come from. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, an aesthetic of depersonalization, meaning a belief that the poet should be removed from the poem, dominated theories about how to write poetry. For example, T. S. Eliot not only was one of the century's major English poets, he also set the critical values and standards that would be used to judge poetry and determine the way poetry ought to be interpreted. Writing in 1920, he says in □Tradition and the Individual Talent,□ a classic of twentieth-century criticism, □The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.□ This implies that in trying to understand a poem, nothing about the poet's life, thought, or environment may be introduced.

I. A. Richards, whose influence was as important as Eliot's in shaping the way people, especially readers in universities, think about English poetry, published *Practical Criticism* nine years later, in 1929. In it, he solidifies a position he had been working on through the 1920s. Simply stated, Richards argues for an approach to poetry that regards each poem as a hermetic object, meaning that it is impervious to outside interference or influence. It exists in its own independence, isolated and separate from everything but itself, even from other poems. A poem's meaning can be found only from closely reading the words of the poem itself and reflecting on their relation to nothing else but each other. Requirements of reading this way are to accept that meaning might, in fact, be elusive and to recognize ambiguity as an inherent and inescapable part of knowing and understanding.

At the same time that this self-enclosed idea of reading was establishing itself, another wave, as strong and as influential, arose. In 1893, two physicians, Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud, published *Studies in Hysteria*, a series of case histories of patients who were plagued with incapacitating conditions that were not the result of physical problems but were apparently mental or emotional in origin. These conditions, the doctors argued, would go into remission when the sufferers could think about and interpret their symptoms based on associations they brought forth when they let themselves say whatever came into their minds□that is, by □free association.□ In 1900, Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams* (first English translation, 1913), which used his psychoanalytic method of free association to penetrate the surface of dreams, or the □manifest□ content, and uncover the hidden meaning of dreams, their □latent□ or underlying content. This method of interpretation is the opposite of the critical method proposed by Eliot and Richards. They turn interpretation back upon the object being interpreted (the poem on the page) and exclude from consideration the person and the personal (the poet's biography) or any outside event. Freud allows interpretation to roam freely and welcomes any association, however far-fetched it might appear. A

poem, from a psychoanalytic perspective□being the product of a highly charged mental state□can be seen as a kind of dream. Like dreams, poems offer, according to Freud, surface or manifest content, which must be interpreted by uncovering the hidden or latent content. Reaching that original content and meaning becomes a matter of associating freely from the given to the hidden.

As opposed as these two approaches seem to be, they share the assumption that interpretation is necessary. The need for interpretation indicates that there is a meaning to be decoded from a set of words, a meaning that the words themselves are concealing until they are somehow made to reveal it. Both approaches assume that something is hidden. However, those who forbid the use of any outside information to interpret a poem are guided by the fear that such interpretation, instead of illuminating the poem, will distort it and make it express something imposed upon it by a reader. The poem becomes, under such conditions, a vehicle to reinforce ideas, emotions, sentiments, and responses that the reader already has. Consequently, the poem and the work of the poet will be debased. Rather than challenging the reader to new awareness, the poem becomes a reflection of the reader's notions and prejudices, a recapitulation of what already is, rather than a bearer of something new.

This is not an idle concern, yet it is one that risks causing too great a removal of poetry from the human sphere. The concern can become a justification for denying the worth of a poet who creates poetry to express overcharged emotion in order to gain relief from it by sharing fundamental human experience with a community of readers. Readers, too, can be deprived of experiencing highly charged, humanly grounded emotions that elate, purge, and enlighten. Traditionally, poets□either in their own person, like Dante, William Blake, and William Wordsworth, or through characters serving as their surrogates, like Virgil, Homer, Shakespeare, and John Milton□have been heroes who have gone through hell, seen visions of heaven, and returned to tell about it. Moreover, poetry can explore the limits of psychic and emotional experience and cross the borders of what is judged acceptable by social, moral, or religious standards. It can strive to reach levels of perception beyond those of the five senses. Consequently, poetry can be an art associated with external environments and extrinsic purposes and not only with the act of creating hermetic, self-enclosed, self-enclosing artifacts.

The problem remains, then, what associations are to be deemed admissible□only those found within the poem or those free associations the poem suggests when its author's biography and its originating conditions are recognized? The problem is, perhaps, a problem only when one attempts to impose a rule from outside and from above. Each poem may offer a solution to the problem by demonstrating which method most richly reveals its own riches most fully. If outside information is acceptable in formulating the meanings of a poem, it follows, too, that advances in biographical, historical, and cultural scholarship can change readers' understanding of what a poem is saying.

In the case of Aiken's □The Room,□ the problem the reader faces is this: Does the poem benefit from the reader's awareness of the circumstances of Aiken's childhood and if it does, how? Were Aiken called upon to answer the question about the admissibility of an author's biography for the understanding of his poetry, it is clear from

his writing that he would think its exclusion indefensible and damaging. That is obvious from his mocking criticism (found in his essay □A Basis for Criticism,□ quoted in Catharine Seigel's article □Conrad Aiken and the Seduction of Suicide□) against the proponents of exclusion:

We have heard, we still hear savage outcries against [the autobiographical] method□it is by the idolators of art considered a despicable sort of espionage, this ruffianly pillaging of the great man's archives and arcana, this wholly unwarranted detective-work in his kitchen or sleeping-quarters. . . . Simple-minded certainly is the cry of these zealots today that the artist's □life□ is not of the smallest importance, that his work is everything, and that if indeed there is any demonstrable relationship between the two□a fact considered by some extremely dubious□it at any rate sheds no light.

Aiken believed, as quoted in Seigel, that the poet □must make his experience articulate for the benefit of others, he must be, in the evolving consciousness of man, the servant-example, and in fact he has little choice in the matter.□ Knowing the details of Aiken's childhood□his father's suicide after murdering his wife□it is fair to seek in □The Room□ the experience represented by □the struggle / Of darkness against darkness.□ That struggle refers to an experience of the poet narrator, and he is impelled to tell the reader about it and thus about himself, as the opening words of the poem indicate, with a haunting passion for memorializing, □Through that window . . . / . . . I saw the struggle.□

To refer to a □struggle / Of darkness against darkness□ is to indicate nothing that can be seen. □Darkness□ itself may represent a metaphor. The seventeenth-century English poet John Milton, for example, in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, describes hell's indescribability, its alternate dimensionality, by comparing hell to □A Dungeon horrible,□ which □on all sides round / As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible.□ Hell is without light, but the darkness can be seen there. Darkness is an attribute of hell. That resonance may serve to deepen the anguish in □The Room,□ but the darkness is presented as something itself, not as an attribute of something else. If it is an attribute of something else, it is an attribute of something omitted from the poem. Thus darkness as an image obscures rather than illuminates whatever is being represented. If nothing is being represented but darkness itself, these questions must arise: Why is darkness so terrible? How does an attribute like darkness come to be divided into two? What makes darkness represent a struggle that is nothing but pain?

Intuitively, one might guess that the answer to the last of those questions is the wish to avoid looking at the source of that pain directly. The questions as a whole yield a convincing answer, and the intuition seems to be confirmed once the facts are known. Aiken heard the argument preceding the suicide and murder, heard the pistol shots, and saw the bleeding bodies on the bed and on the floor in his mother's bedroom. He responded with an uncanny calmness, with a suppression of self. As Seigel's article points out, it was □with a degree of calmness and self-possession beyond his years and that under the tragic circumstances was almost weird,□ the *Savannah Morning News* on February 28, 1901, reported, that □the lad indicated the room of his mother□ to a

police officer. Most telling: the first thing the police officer saw when he opened the door to the room was *darkness*. Here is a description of the room from the same newspaper account, as provided by the police officer: □The room was in almost total darkness, as it was then scarcely broad daylight, and the shutters of the windows were closed.□

To ignore these facts and exclude their association when considering the image of □the struggle / Of darkness with darkness□ suggests doctrinal stubbornness and critical negligence rather than interpretive rigor. The echo of the suicidal struggle between his parents and within his father, which spilled over into his own psychic constitution (as a knowledge of Aiken's lifelong obsession with suicide and his several unsuccessful attempts underscores) is suggested not only by □the struggle / Of darkness against darkness□ but also by the fact that that struggle is described as □crush[ing] upon itself, / Contracting powerfully . . . as if / It killed itself.□

Expressing the suicidal struggle of his father by □the struggle / Of darkness against darkness□ transforms a specific biographical event that contributed to robbing life of meaning and the boy of his ability to feel. It endows the event with mythic dimension and makes one suicide and murder an instance of an archetypal process, a cosmic struggle of terrible forces engaged not only in destruction but also in an essential preliminary stage of creation. Likewise, the association endows the archetype with an emotional depth and force that gives it resonance and shows it to be not just an intellectual exercise but a universal expression of actual experience. In the poem itself, the manifest and the latent contents of each term resonate inside each other, until the poem vibrates in the reader's mind like a complex experience.

Source: Neil Heims, Critical Essay on □The Room,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

In □The Room,□ Aiken suggests that destruction necessarily precedes creation□that in order for something to be created, something first must be destroyed. Does this make sense to you? Can you think of instances where this might apply? Make a table of ten items. In the left-hand column, list destructive acts. In the right-hand column, list the creative acts they have given or could give rise to. Then, for each item, write a short explanation. Choose from personal, historical, mythological, religious, emotional, geological or meteorological, and cultural events.

Arrange individual interviews with four to six people and discuss a traumatic experience in their lives, finding out what the experience was, how they responded to it at the time, how it affected them later, and what weight it bears in their lives now. Remember to be cautious, sensitive, and respectful in your approach, since you may be dealing with delicate material and calling forth painful memories. Immediately after each interview, while the conversation is still fresh in your mind, write out a case history. After you have compiled all your histories, write a short essay describing the points of similarity in the several stories you have gathered.

Choose an important event in your life. Write a matter-of-fact prose summary of that event, describing its effect on you, its consequences, and what you learned from it. Then thinking of the same event, write a poem in which you offer the same narrative but in disguise, never referring to the actual event but instead relating it in other terms, that is, symbolically.

Write a short story whose outcome is that the main character undergoes the kind of experience that would result in his or her writing □The Room.□

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Reacting to nineteenth-century poetry, which often was highly emotional and narrative in style and strongly reflected the personality of the poet, modernist poets of the first decades of the twentieth century produce detached, intellectually complex, usually unrhymed, and obscure poetry characterized by fragmented imagery.

Today: Through rap and hip-hop and in poetry slams, young poets of the early twenty-first century, continuing the rebellion begun in the 1950s by beat generation poets against academic and modernist poetry, write and perform poetry using everyday and sometimes even obscene speech in heavily rhymed verse concerned with social problems and highlighting the opinions, adventures, and personalities of the poets themselves.

1920s: While the influence of psychoanalytic thought creates a climate that allows some writers like Aiken, James Joyce, and Henry Roth to explore and express emotional vulnerability, other writers, like Ernest Hemingway, still insist on taking a tough stand and work to project the image of a man who never lets down his guard no matter how deeply injured he may feel.

Today: Because of the continuing influence of psychoanalytic thought and the influence of the gay liberation and women's movements on the culture as a whole, it has become much more culturally acceptable for men to express their emotions openly and to admit their vulnerability, as is evident in the work of writers like David Sedaris and Garrison Keillor.

1920s: Poets like Aiken and novelists like Marcel Proust, under the influence of the psychologists of their day□among them, Freud and Jung□explore the effect of memory on present experience, believing that in order to understand and be at peace in the present, it is necessary to come to terms with the traumatic past.

Today: Although some professionals still think that reprocessing events that haunt us is useful, among some schools of psychiatry and psychology, there is a belief that exploration of the past through memory only keeps people bound to that past and that the use of psychotropic drugs rather than sifting through memory is the way to overcome traumatic experience. Rather than sifting through memories, writers like John Falk, Kay Redfields Jamison, and William Styron write memoirs describing their use of psychotropic drugs to deal with mental distress.

What Do I Read Next?

Collected Poems (1953) offers a rich survey of Aiken's poetry. Presenting Aiken's poetry in chronological order, this volume enables readers to see the development of recurrent themes, images, and concerns and the way Aiken varies and transforms them.

In *Jacob's Room* (1922), a short novel about a young man killed in World War I, Virginia Woolf attempts to tell the story of his life through a series of scenes presented as if viewed from outside and without the help of an organizing and orienting narrator.

In □The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,□ published in *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917, T. S. Eliot gives his sense of the devitalized nature of early-twentieth-century sensibility by creating a portrait of a character with a listless personality, portrayed through a series of images.

Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) is an autobiographical novel recounting his brutal and traumatic childhood and his parents' terrible marriage. He combined traditional narrative with the stream-of-consciousness technique introduced by James Joyce.

After writing *Call It Sleep*, Roth was silent for the next sixty years until, between 1994 and 1998, he published a four-volume continuation of that novel (*A Star Shines over Morris Park* [1994], *A Diving Rock on the Hudson* [1995], *From Bondage* [1996], and *Requiem for Harlem* [1998]), a tribute to memory titled collectively *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. It traces the growth of his artistic and emotional sensibility through the 1920s, juxtaposes it with his experience through the 1990s, and combines stream-of-consciousness and traditional narrative techniques.

□Counterparts,□ one of the stories in *Dubliners* (1914), by James Joyce, draws its emotional force through the use of a series of painful images that dramatize the vain, empty, and cruel life of a beaten man.

Further Study

Aiken, Conrad, *Ushant*, Little, Brown, 1952.

In *Ushant*, an autobiographical novel, Aiken describes his struggles with despair and his own suicidal impulses resulting from the childhood trauma of his parents' death. The book also chronicles his many friendships with poets such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and traces his career and the development of his thought.

Jung, C. G., *The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung*, edited by Violet Staub de Laszlo, Modern Library, 1993.

This anthology of Jung's writings provides an excellent introduction to his thought and includes selections on symbols, archetypes, and the collective unconscious.

Lorenz, Clarissa, *Lorelei Two: My Life with Conrad Aiken*, University of Georgia Press, 1983.

This book is an account of life with Aiken in the late 1920s and early 1930s, written by his second wife.

Spivey, Ted R., *Time's Stop in Savannah*, Mercer University Press, 1997.

In an examination of the body of Aiken's work, Spivey, who conducted many interviews with Aiken toward the end of his life, combines biography with literary analysis.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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