Russian Letter Study Guide

Russian Letter by John Yau

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

“Russian Letter,” published in 2002, in the collection *Borrowed Love Poems*, is a quirky little poem that at first seems to promise to offer a deep meaning of life and the passage of time and what all that means to the individual. Then in the middle of this poem, the narrator appears to change his mind. First, the narrator offers a standard philosophical theory about the makeup of the past and the present and how one reflects upon the other. This philosophical theory is offered through some source, referred to in the phrase, “it is said.” Then the poet casts doubt on the theory; the narrator suggests that maybe this philosophical message goes too far. Just as the reader anticipates an alternative statement by the narrator, the poem offers a surprise ending, which neither provides an argument against the theory nor offers a more stimulating one. Instead, the narrator inserts an artistic memory, an image as beautiful as a Rembrandt painting, leaving the reader with a picture to ponder rather than an answer. If there is an answer to the questions in life, this poem hints that those answers cannot be easily handed over like a gift.

Yau’s “Russian Letter” is the first in a series of six poems, all with the same title. Reading all six of these poems does not necessarily offer an easier task of understanding Yau’s poetry, but it might help the reader to relax in the reading of Yau’s poetry. Rather than attempting to make literal sense of Yau’s poems, the reader needs to merely enjoy the images, the individual couplets, and the sounds of the language. Or as Paisley Rekdal, writing for the *International Examiner*, described Yau’s poetry, his “writing attempts to mimic the effects of abstract painting in that words or sentences become isolated images that are irreducible as narratives: they exist simply as line and color and tone.” Yau’s poem, “Russian Letter” is like a painting, in other words, one that uses language as its medium.

Author Biography

John Yau was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, in 1950, shortly after his parents left Shanghai, China. In 1972, at the age of twenty-two, Yau graduated from Bard College with a bachelor's degree. Six years later, he received his M.F.A. degree from Brooklyn College.

After that, Yau wrote seventeen books of poetry. Three of these, published in the early 2000s, are *Borrowed Love Poems* (2002), in which the poem "Russian Letter" appears; *Ing Grish* (2005); and *Paradiso Diaspora* (2006). He also wrote several books about artists, including one on the famous modern American artist Andy Warhol. Yau's essays about artists and their works have been published in various books dedicated to art criticism. In addition, Yau is the author of two collections of short stories, *My Symptoms* (1998) and *Hawaiian Cowboys* (1995), which, despite its title, contain stories mostly about people living in New York City. Yau has taught both art criticism and poetry at several schools, including Pratt Institute in Brooklyn; Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island; and the University of California at Berkeley.

Over the years, Yau received many awards for his poetry, including the Lavan Award from the Academy of American Poets and the Jerome Shestack Prize from the *American Poetry Review*.

Summary and Analysis

Lines 1 through 5

John Yau's "Russian Letter" is a short poem of ten couplets (pairs of lines), with each couplet offering the reader a brief but fascinating image. Yau has stated that the couplet is one of his favorite poetic forms, offering short but concise reflections on specific themes.

The first couplet in Yau's "Russian Letter" opens with an image of time and the memories and experiences associated with the passage of time. However, this opening image is not offered as coming from the narrator. Rather, the narrator suggests that the first thoughts of this poem belong to someone else. The narrator begins with the phrase, "It is said." In other words, there is a widely recognized and affirmed theory that the narrator wants to discuss. This theory is stated as "the past / sticks to the present." The narrator offers this philosophical statement in such a way that the reader senses (because of the "It is said" phrase) that the narrator will either reinforce or refute this belief later in the poem. By using this opening phrase, "It is said," the narrator implies both an inherent weakness in the philosophical statement and an awareness that it has perpetuated and is well known. The pronoun "it" locates the power of the statement in tradition, away from the narrator. This signals that the narrator may not agree with the statement at all or, at least, may be skeptical that this statement reflects truth as far as the narrator understands it.

In the second couplet, the narrator expounds on the stickiness of the past to the present. The past is stuck "like glue" to the present. This simile provides an image for the statement. What does it mean for the past to be stuck to the present? And how powerful is the adhesion? After all, some glues can be easily washed away. In the next lines, the narrator makes clear there is a lot of stickiness, using a metaphor, creating the image of flies stuck on tacky paper. Flies are small and frail. If flies are caught on a sticky tape, there is little or no chance for them to escape. This image of flies stuck on a gummy surface conveys the serious, even dire nature of the adhesive that connects the past to the present. So by the end of the second couplet, it appears that according to the philosophy of the statement, one has no chance of escaping one's past. The past holds each person in it or in place. No matter what is done, there is no escape. Then by the fifth line of this poem, the action intensifies. Not only is the past stuck to the present, like flies in a sticky trap, but everyone is "struggling to pull free" of it. This adds an element of desperation and futile effort. The past has now turned into something negative, something that one wrestles with in order to escape from it. This is, according to the philosophy introduced at the beginning of the poem, a fruitless effort.

Lines 6 through 11

Line 6 at the end of the third couplet repeats the opening phrase: “It is said,” thus signaling a continuation of this authoritative philosophy or offering another philosophical statement that is equally uncomfortable for the narrator. “It is said, someone / cannot change,” the narrator states in lines 6 and 7. The reader might wonder, at this point, if the narrator believes this statement or if the narrator is going to argue against it. The idea of someone not being able to change seems to run contrary to the evidence because people change all the time. Children grow up; people change professions; single people become married people, and so on. What kind of change is the narrator talking about? The narrator provides a hint in the next few lines.

The idea that people cannot change is not true on some level, perhaps, but the narrator is referring to transitions on a deeper level than mere appearance. As the poem continues, readers learn that the narrator means that people “cannot change / the clothes / in which / their soul / was born.” The word “clothes” does not refer to wardrobe but rather to the physical self, perhaps suggesting the composition of DNA, the make-up of one’s personality, and other essential traits that each baby has in place at birth. What is interesting in this part of the poem is how the poet has chopped up the components of this statement, keeping the reader in suspense as each new line adds more pertinent information. As readers continue into the next lines of the poem, they discover what the narrator is really talking about. The “clothes” are the full-blooded body in which a person is born, that which the soul inhabits and animates. The body of each person houses the intellect, talents, and the personality that determine how each person chooses to use these faculties. These factors or traits cannot change, this philosophy contends. The parallel is drawn here: the past is stuck to the present just as the prenatal characteristics are stuck to the newborn baby.

Lines 12 through 20

In the twelfth line the narrator sets himself apart from the statement of the first section of the poem. The narrator states, “I, however,” suggesting an alternative statement to come. The narrator’s full declaration is given in degrees; he “would not / go so far” as to claim that no one can change or that the past is stuck like glue to the present or that “we are flies / struggling to pull free.” The narrator backs off from these beliefs, but what is not clear is what the narrator would replace these beliefs with. Maybe that is the narrator’s point: Maybe the narrator cannot agree fully with the first assertions but, while he places himself in a more moderate position, he has no counterstatement to offer.

At the fifteenth line, Yau, the poet, brings art into his poem. Yau’s poetry is known for jumping from one image to another without necessarily providing a bridge between the two images, defying convention, just as the narrator refuses to subscribe to a well-known philosophical or psychological concept that the past and present are inevitably stuck to one another. At the fifteenth line, the narrator suddenly claims that he is not the famous Dutch painter Rembrandt, “master of the black / and green darkness.”

Rembrandt's paintings were often highly contrasted, with large portions of the canvas in dark colors, which directed the viewer's focus to the subject, which might be painted in comparatively bright colors. So the "black / and green darkness" that is mentioned in the poem could be a reference to the dark tones of the oil paints that Rembrandt used. The narrator then describes a hawk that "shrieks / down from the sky." One can imagine Rembrandt painting such a piece with dark skies above and dark earth below and all the light centered on the hawk.

In ending his poem with the seemingly disconnected reference to Rembrandt, the poet might be making the statement that he paints his poem with words but does not claim to define life or philosophy through his poetry. With the phrase, "Nor am I Rembrandt," the narrator might be also saying that he claims no mastery, no super statement that answers life's most important questions, for example, those pertaining to what remains the same through time. The poem offers images only, like a painting.

Themes

Time

The shortness of Yau's poem "Russian Letter" dictates that the themes are only briefly mentioned or suggested. The subject given the most words is the idea that the past is stuck to the present. Clearly time passes, and yet the poem asserts that it is commonly believed that the past is always determining the present. Too, the poem points out that as much as people may struggle to escape the past, they have as much chance of doing so as flies stuck on gummy paper. The statement is fatalistic or pessimistic. The plot is already fixed in and by the past, and no matter what effort is exerted, the past dictates present circumstances, no matter how much one may struggle against that. This is a common way of seeing the time-bound human condition. It is a belief that strikes the narrator as extreme, one that he chooses to step back from, trying to find a less extreme view. But then the narrator does not offer an alternative; all readers get is the narrator's inability to agree. The narrator does not offer an alternative view from the one stated as commonly held.

Change

Yau's poem also points out that it is widely believed that people "cannot change." While the narrator separates from this position, too, he explains that commonly it is asserted that what happens to people is determined by the nature they have at birth, by those factors of the physical self that the soul inhabits. The narrator is able to imagine something more to causation than this idea that "someone / cannot change / the clothes / in which / their soul / was born." There must be more factors that conspire to shape people's lives, but the narrator questions his own ability to say what they are. The narrator would not "go so far," and yet, he admits, he is no "Rembrandt / master of the black / and green darkness." The narrator is not a master of subtlety, not a master of things that are dark enough to blend black and green. The image of the hawk is ominous; this bird of prey "shrieks / down from the sky" when it is intent on making a kill. There must be factors, the image suggests, that create change that are not determined by one's innate features, factors of risk and chance, perhaps another being's innate nature. The narrator suggests these potential determinants in the final image.

Authority

The phrase, "It is said," appears twice in the poem. The phrase repeats in the poem, which makes sense since the common or widely believed verities that might be introduced with this phrase are themselves repeated frequently. The phrase suggests tradition and a history of repetition. The truths that are repeated come with a certain authority. They come with the authority of tradition or of scripture or of widely circulated philosophical or psychological premises. These are not the facts of nature but rather the

theories about nature. With repetition through time, like the momentum of often repeated clichés, they gather weight and apparent validity, though they may nonetheless be incorrect or disproved by empirical evidence. Given the familiarity of the observation or interpretation, such statements may be accepted blindly as indisputable fact. The narrator does not subscribe to the often repeated belief, but he admits to not being clever enough to come up with a substitute, something that might persuade others to see the accepted verity as no longer valid.

Nonconformance

The narrator's resistance to the often repeated observation suggests that the poem recommends resistance to conformity, resistance to blind acceptance of what others have repeatedly said is true. Nonconformity requires not going along with common beliefs just because they have been accepted by the majority. The narrator suggests that there are more ways of seeing the nature of human circumstances, more ways of understanding what causes human events to turn out as they do. The narrator's refusal to align with the dominant belief seems to serve as the poet's recommendation to readers to think independently and to search beyond the pat explanations. Those who believe in the fatalistic idea are as doomed as the flies stuck to a sticky surface; those who seek a larger, more inclusive perspective on the nature of things have the hope of escaping the past through their larger understanding of it.

Style

Style

Couplets

Yau's poem "Russian Letter" is composed of couplets, a unit of verse made up of two successive lines. The poem consists of ten couplets. No couplet is complete unto itself, however, as both the subject and the grammar continue from one couplet to the next. The poem has only one full stop: a period appears at the end of the first line of the sixth couplet.

Yau has stated that couplets allow him to present brief images. In this way, the poet contends, he can concentrate on the two lines, each in their own time, without thinking ahead and trying to determine what the whole poem will be about. Although in this poem most of Yau's couplets do not contain complete thoughts, many do create interesting images, which might be explained by another statement that the poet has made. Yau has also compared couplets to a painter's individual brush strokes that eventually make up a whole painting. In the first couplet of "Russian Letter," Yau states the central idea of the poem and in the phrase, "it is said," suggests that the idea is widely recognized. In just the first two lines (the first couplet), the reader gains a sense of what the first half of the poem is about. The second couplet offers a simile that draws a picture of the philosophical idea. Yau uses the couplets in a free verse format, in which there are no end rhymes and no fixed beats per line.

Enjambment

Enjambment occurs when a full stop does not occur at the end of a line and the grammatical arrangement continues into or beyond the next line. This happens throughout Yau's poem, beginning with the first two lines, which read: "It is said, the past / sticks to the present." The second line here does not end with the word "present" but continues with a simile in the third line: "the past / sticks to the present / like glue." That completed statement does not end either. Rather a concrete illustration for the abstract statement is given in the fourth and fifth lines which compares the past stuck to the present to flies stuck on adhesive paper. However, the added point here is the use of "we." The fourth and fifth lines read: "that we are flies / struggling to pull free." So the comparison conveys the idea that just as flies stuck on adhesive paper struggle to get free, so do people stuck in their pasts struggle to free themselves from their histories. Sometimes enjambment is used for emphasis: the line break forces readers' eyes to skip down and left to the beginning of the next line and doing so puts emphasis on the word the begins the next line. Enjambment might also create a sense of ambiguity, with one line appearing to mean one thing until the next line is read and the meaning changes. This last point occurs in Yau's poem between the third and fourth couplets. At line six, "It is said, someone," continues unto the fourth couplet with "cannot change."

People cannot change is the meaning that the reader brings out of this. However, continuing with line eight, the reader discovers that the narrator is really saying that people “cannot change the clothes,” not literally change dress but rather, as the next line clarifies, “the clothes / in which / their soul / was born.” Reaching the end of the sentence readers see that the word “clothes” is a metaphor for the innate self, the body with all of its features, which is animated by the soul. By line eleven the statement is completed. But during the passage from line six until line eleven, several misinterpretations, or guesses, about what the narrator is trying to say are made, thus keeping the reader off balance and misunderstanding through the use of enjambment.

Imagery

Imagery provides a picture through words. In “Russian Letter” several images occur. The first image is of “glue,” a way of conveying how the past clings to the present. To clarify further and to add a sense of impending doom, the poem presents a more vivid picture in a metaphor, “we are flies,” and like flies, we struggle “to pull free.” Thus the philosophical statement about the ever-presence of the past is conveyed through the image of flies struggling to free themselves from sticky paper. Just as the flies are doomed, so are people in their struggle to escape the past.

The next image uses the common experience of getting dressed and compares that to the soul inhabiting the body at birth. While people change their clothes literally quite frequently, the soul cannot escape the body it animates and get into a different one. Two assertions are being made here: first, the narrator states that it is commonly held, often “said,” that people cannot change; second, this idea is equivalent to saying that the soul is contained in one body, all of the features of which are determined at birth. The image of clothes and the fact that people do change their clothes may anticipate the narrator’s refusal to agree that people cannot escape the determinants fixed at birth.

The last image of the hawk suggests a variable that may conflict with the commonly repeated fatalistic statement. The hawk’s nature is to shriek “down from the sky” in its dive to kill its prey The timing or chance that brings its prey into view and makes it vulnerable to the hawk are factors not so much associated with either creature’s past as with current circumstances. In other words, the predestination suggested in the commonly held belief does not take into consideration factors of chance and timing. The hawk image intrudes as a fact of nature that disrupts the philosophical statement the poem has presented as common knowledge and with which the narrator cannot fully agree.

Connotation

Connotation is meaning that is recognized through common usage in a particular community. Words have literal meaning, but they can also connote other meanings by the way they are used. The phrase, “It is said,” connotes repetition through the years, a widely repeated and recognized truth that comes into the present as though it were canonical because it has been repeated so often that it is now virtually taken for

granted. The statement that is so introduced has more power because it has a history or tradition behind it, because it is familiar and frequently repeated. It may be an old saying, not substantiated by empirical evidence, but through its longstanding recognition it has accumulated validity with many people. The poet conveys this validity through the connotation that can be inferred in the phrase, rather than in the phrase's literal meaning.

Historical Context

Rembrandt

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (July 15, 1607–October 4, 1669), one of Europe's greatest painters, was born in Leiden in the Netherlands. He was a prolific artist, creating more than 600 paintings, 400 etchings, and 1400 sketches. His portrait paintings show his expertise in handling light and texture and his ability to convey personality in the look in a subject's eyes. Some of his more famous paintings are "St. Paul in Prison" (1627); "Supper at Emmaus" (1630); "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp" (1632); "Young Girl at an Open Half-Door" (1645); "The Mill" (1650); "Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer" (1653); and "The Return of the Prodigal Son" (sometime after 1660). Rembrandt's subjects included his own face, which he depicted in more than sixty self-portraits. Other models that he used for his paintings included members of his family, such as his mother, his wife, and his children. One third of his paintings contain Biblical themes. His treatment of religious subjects illustrates how he found ways to make the spiritual event a human one.

Bob Dylan

Yau's poetry has sometimes been compared to the lyrics of Bob Dylan. Dylan, who was born in 1941, is best known for his music. However, his lyrics have been studied as poetry. Dylan became famous in the 1960s during the upheaval over civil rights and the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. He was one of the leaders of the counterculture movement during that turbulent decade. His lyrics were often used to inspire protests or to explain them. Some of his more famous lyrics, including "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Times They Are a-Changin,'" became anthems against the war and in support of the civil rights movement. His poetry includes political, religious, social commentary, literary, and philosophical themes. Dylan was named *Time* magazine's most influential folk singer of the twentieth century. He has also been referred to as a master poet. In 2006, Dylan was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Although Dylan has been honored and praised as a poet, he resists the literary label. Dylan recorded over forty albums of his original lyrics, and in 2006, he was still touring around the world performing his music.

John Ashbery

Yau's poetry is often compared to John Ashbery, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and recipient of the so-called genius prize, the MacArthur Award. As of 2007, Ashbery had written over twenty books of poetry, including *Chinese Whispers* (2002); *Your Name Here* (2000); *Girls on the Run: A Poem* (1999); *Wakefulness* (1998); and *Can You Hear, Bird* (1995). His 1975 publication, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* won him the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the National Book Award.

His work often focuses on the meaning of reality or the ultimate truth about life and whether a person can actually fully grasp it. Much of his poetry attempts to expose how people's minds are so locked into the conventional language of science, technology, and journalism that they are unable to grasp what reality is all about. People blindly accept what others tell them is true. Ashbery tries to point out that clichés hide the truth rather than preserving it. Like Yau, Ashbery was, at one time in his life, dedicated to the visual arts. Early on, he took drawing and painting classes at the Art Institute of Rochester, and as an adult, he served as an art critic. Ashbery taught literature classes at Brooklyn College, where Yau was one of his students. Ashbery also taught language and literature at Bard College. Between 2001 and 2003, Ashbery served at the poet laureate of New York state.

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poets

Yau has been linked by some literary critics to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, a loosely connected group of avant-garde poets who, for one thing, tend to recognize the role of the reader in interpreting a poem. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry is said to have begun in the 1970s. However, poets from earlier eras, such as Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), and Frank O'Hara (1926–1966) influenced those who call themselves L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. This group of poets focuses on the political implications inherent in language. In attempts to break down language, some L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets create poems that make no sense, such as making up a poem from the index of a book or using only prepositions in the entire poem. Some L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poems supposedly contain no meaning and are, therefore, considered nonsense poems. In many L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poems, seemingly random thoughts or arbitrary observations are considered the norm. There is also a lack of personal expression generally, as if the poet does not exist. This feature distinguishes these works from, for example, confessional poetry, in which the poet reveals personal aspects of his or her life through poetry. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poems put little stock in the stanza but rather concentrate on each line individually, shaping it to illustrate fragmentation and obscurity. Poets associated with the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry movement include Yau, John Ashbery, Kit Robinson, Douglas Barber, Charles Bernstein, and Lyn Hejinian, among others.

Critical Overview

“Russian Letter” was published in Yau’s collection *Borrowed Love Poems*, which was reviewed by Joshua Clover in *Artforum*. Clover calls the collection “vivid, mysterious, unsettling, and laconically charming in shifting degrees.” Clover then adds that “it’s a terrific and variegated book of poems.” Throughout the collection, Clover writes, Yau’s poetry exemplifies many of the underlying principles of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, who question language, meaning, and identity. Clover finds Yau’s poetry very satisfying, “fun,” and full of “tonal richness.”

Although Yau, in general, received critical consideration for his poetry, that attention has not been extensive, especially in terms of the featured collection, *Borrowed Love Poems*. One other reviewer, however, Paisley Rekdal, writing for a Seattle-based journal, the *International Examiner*, refers to Yau’s “writing aesthetic” as well as his “prolific writing career.” Yau’s writing, Rekdal states, “is almost completely devoid of the autobiographical, the confessional, the personal of any kind.” This, Rekdal finds, makes Yau’s poetry “both refreshing and irritating to read.” Yau’s writing is hard to extract meaning from, Rekdal writes. His poetry is not based on “linear or concrete narratives of physical or emotional experience,” like so much other popular poetry that is easier to understand. Unlike the poetry that readers become accustomed to in college or in popular magazines, Rekdal continues, Yau’s poetry is an expression of “the inauthentic.” Rekdal understands the fact that one of the purposes of Yau’s poetry, true to the beliefs shared by other L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, is to present the idea that language is a poor transmitter of meaning. However Rekdal questions why anyone would want to read poetry that lacks meaning. Language has it shortcomings, Rekdal admits, but, after all, language is what gives “our life shape and, what’s more, meaning.”

Although critic Lisa Chen, writing for *Asian Week*, finds Yau’s “nonlinear flights of unadulterated invention” sometimes “wearying,” she compliments the poet for his “ingenuity,” which she states “never lets up.” Chen continues: Yau’s “poems tell us that if we don’t create our own terms, our own vision of the world that doesn’t put the mainstream view or dominant culture perspective at its center, we risk reinforcing that center.” Another critic, Christopher A. Shinn, writing for the *International Examiner*, describes Yau as having a “rich and complex poetic imagination.” Evaluating another collection of poetry in this review, (Yau’s *Forbidden Entries*, 1997), Shinn states that Yau’s work “combines wit, good humor and literary and artistic complexity.” He concludes that Yau is “one of the best Asian American writers.”

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Hart has degrees in literature and creative writing. In the following essay, she examines the spiritual images in Yau's poem.

If literary critics are accurate in describing Yau as a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet, one who believes that meaning is not inherent in a poem and that the only meaning that can be found is that which is discovered by the reader, then that opens the door for reading spirituality in Yau's poem "Russian Letter" whether or not the poet intended it to be there. Given the mention of "soul," a spiritual interpretation seems logical. Only the poet knows for sure what his mood was or where his thoughts came from when he wrote this poem. But there are images in this poem, besides that of the soul, that conjure up a sense of the spiritual. Whether this spirituality is inspired by the poet, his language, his images, or the reader who ponders them is not the point. What matters is that if readers look close enough and allow themselves the freedom to explore their own interpretations, a sense of the spiritual can be discovered in this poem.

There is no direct mention of any spiritual truth that the narrator trusts or will use to counter the ideas put forth so far in this poem. The narrator only states a lack of belief or at least a limit to the belief that people are stuck in glue like flies. . . .

The first phrase in this short poem is the statement, "It is said," which could be heard as of the voice of a preacher standing in the pulpit in front of a congregation and reading from some holy, or highly respected, book. The preacher's finger might be pointing to a particular sacred passage in the book, suggesting that what he or she is about to say are the inspired words of scripture. One can almost hear the preacher's voice ringing out over the pews, resounding off the tall ceilings of the house of worship. The preacher might pause to make sure he or she has the attention of the people and then repeat the phrase, adding the full course of the message. "It is said," the preacher repeats, that "the past / sticks to the present / like glue." This is how Yau opens his poem, somewhat like that preacher, as he has his narrator proclaim these words, which, for some people, might be a sacred precept, one that is completely honored and believed.

Looked at in another way, this statement could be simply delivered in a classroom, one focused on comparative religions or spiritual beliefs. The narrator could be explaining, as if he were a professor standing in front of a group of students, that the statement that "the past / sticks to the present" is similar to the Buddhist concept of karma, through which one's past lives determine the present one, contaminating the present with past mistakes or blessing it with favors for good deeds performed in previous lives. Or the narrator could be pointing out that the belief of original sin. For example, according to some Christian faiths, babies are born with original sin, inherited from the disobedient first parents, the Biblical Adam and Eve. The original sin is stuck like glue to the babies' souls and must be cleansed through the sacrament of baptism.

Yau's poem continues with the statement that not only is the past stuck to the present but "that we are flies / struggling to pull free." The past, in other words, is this huge strip of sticky paper to which all humans, in the present situation of their lives, are stuck. Not only are all humans stuck to the past, they are also struggling to flee from the negative effects of the past on their present lives. This sense of struggle is an underlying theme in many religions. Some religions teach that people need to free themselves from past weaknesses so they can avoid possible future temptations. Another spiritual belief is that this struggle to free oneself is a lifelong work, because even if people tend to get free from that sticky paper, they foolishly forget to look where they are going and fly right back into it. The practice of some spiritual beliefs is to train people to avoid the traps and therefore to avoid the struggle. Even if temptations are not sinful, a struggle is implied in the work of remaining focused on the more spiritual aspects of life rather on the temporary worldly pleasures it offers. Yau's poem brings all of these spiritual ideas into readers' thoughts.

In line six, the narrator of Yau's poem repeats the phrase: "It is said." Again, one thinks of that voice bellowing out to the congregation as the preacher emphasizes the next message, which is: "Someone / cannot change / the clothes / in which / their soul / was born." The spiritual or religious concept of the "soul" connects the poem to a religious interpretation. One of the basic elements that many religions teach is that people can change. Religious teachers try to lead people from their sinful ways and into lives filled with grace. If successful, this transition would mark a very big change. Conversion from one religion to another is also change. Baptism implies change, as does the Buddhist concept that all life is change. Who would preach the idea that people cannot change? Maybe the narrator has given the reader an incomplete thought. Perhaps the complete thought is that people cannot change without Buddha, Jesus, or Mohammed. That, at least, would make more sense. Despite the confusion over this statement of the inability to change, the spiritual connotation remains apparent. Only a person who has some sense of the spiritual would make mention of a soul, no matter what religious practice is followed or even if that person has no affiliation with a religion. If Yau's narrator mentions a soul, then Yau's narrator seems to be talking about the world of the spirit, which reinforces (or at least encourages) a spiritual interpretation of the poem to this point.

But the narrator in line twelve denies absolute authority to the statement "It is said." The narrator "would not / go so far" as agreeing completely. It is not clear if this means that the narrator would not go so far as to declare that people have souls or if he would not go so far as to state that people cannot change. Also, it is not known if the narrator himself has a spiritual belief that counters the statement that people are stuck and cannot change. There is no direct mention of any spiritual truth that the narrator trusts or will use to counter the ideas put forth so far in this poem. The narrator only states a lack of belief or at least a limit to the belief that people are stuck in glue like flies, unable to correct their mistakes or the mistakes of their parents; unable to free themselves from sins they might have committed in past lives and therefore continue to find themselves stuck and unable to move forward.

The narrator does not mention his own spiritual beliefs outright and may dispute the spiritual concepts that are mentioned in this poem. However, he uses the word, “soul.” Where is the narrator of Yau’s poem taking this concept of soul if not into a spiritual context? And how does his reference to Rembrandt fit into all of this?

Well, for one thing, Rembrandt is a creator. Not only does Rembrandt create but, as the narrator refers to the artist, Rembrandt was also a “master.” Rembrandt took the basic elements of color and turned paint and canvas into a reflection, or a picture, of life as he saw it. He created something out of nothing. The narrator of this poem could be using Rembrandt as a metaphor of a supreme being. The narrator might be offering this image to the readers to give them a more concrete belief, one that will counter the more abstract statement that begins with “It is said.” Rembrandt created images, just as various religions teach that there is a spiritual first force that created the world, the animals and fish, and all humans. The narrator could be referring to this master creator as one who paints life similar to the way that Rembrandt created his images.

Yau does not end his poem at this point though. He takes the discussion one step further. Not only does he mention that Rembrandt has created a picture but that, in the narrator’s presentation of this painting, the hawk appears to come alive. Out of the “black / and green darkness,” the hawk dives through the air as if he has been animated, as if it has freed itself from the “glue” of the canvas and paint (or the hawk’s past) and is gliding through the air. The darkness that the narrator mentions could symbolically be the void, and it is out of the void that Rembrandt draws his creation. To prove that Rembrandt has truly brought this hawk to life, the poet imbues the bird with a sound, a voice. The hawk “shrieks” as he plunged out of the sky. Rembrandt, the narrator might be saying, is like a god, one capable of creating life through his mastery of oil paints, brushes, and strokes, one that instills his creations with a soul that is free from the past.

Finally, as the hawk “shrieks / down from the sky,” readers can imagine the bird traveling from the heavens to the earth, an image that could be related to the journey of the soul as it travels from heaven to a new physical body. After all, Yau could have said that the hawk flies across the sky, but instead the poet has the bird soaring downward, coming “from” the sky. This could be seen as the soul in hawk’s clothing.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on “Russian Letter,” in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, he looks at how Yau uses dichotomies, or directly contrasting ideas, to help a short poem cover two philosophical positions.

John Yau's "Russian Letter" is a short, focused poem that packs a lot of ideas into few words. Yau is able to create a thought-provoking piece with such spareness by opposing complex ideas. Rather than leaving out important information, though, Yau accomplishes this by trimming things down to basic opposites. By presenting ideas in dichotomies, he is able to invoke thoughts that represent whole systems of human thought. A nuanced portrait of the world might be required to examine objects on a one-by-one basis, but creating dichotomies allows the poet to categorize ideas into either of the two groupings mentioned. The opposing concepts are coupled: each one incorporates half the world, while its corresponding member incorporates the other half. This arrangement allows the poet to be economical with words as he alludes to complex matters that concern the whole of the human condition. Yau's poem is structured around this principle, a plan perfectly suited to the poem's statement.

Like all of the best poems, 'Russian Letter' gives its readers a familiar feeling—given that one of its themes is the fear of being trapped by the past, this sense of recognition could backfire. But it does not.

"Russian Letter" consists of ten stanzas, each stanza a couplet, and no line is longer than five syllables. Eight of the twenty lines contain only two words. It does not seem short, though. It feels longer than these figures suggest.

Most of the lines are enjambed, making Yau's ideas seem qualified or tentative, more hesitant or uncertain, than they would be if presented in end-line completed units. The resulting flow from one line to the next reminds readers of the complexity of the world, even while Yau's word choices work to simplify the world's nature. The enjambment gives the sense that the ideas Yau touches on in the poem's basic dichotomies hide within them more than his words have room to explain. Plus the narrator seems conflicted about his own possible oversimplification, even as that simplification allows the poem to progress directly through the issues that it raises.

There are quite a few places where "Russian Letter" pairs up opposites. The most significant dichotomy, the one at the poem's center, is the distinction between inertia and motion. The first half of the poem introduces the human struggle against the past, which is presented here as an inhibiting force. The poem ends, though, with the hint that some action might be even more fearful than being stuck in one place. Yau uses the images of the fly stuck in flypaper and the hawk swooping down from the sky to convey these opposites. Most readers would not like to consider themselves as either the helpless insect or the predator's victim, yet these opposite images represent two ways of looking at the human condition: one sees it as predestined by the past, including

physical traits; the other sees it as determined by arbitrary or at least unanticipated events, including the actions of others.

This distinction between being stuck and being seized reflects the distinction between nouns and verbs, the most basic tools of language. Nouns, in and of themselves, are names for inert and active subjects—they represent objects, like glue or adhesive, that cannot move on their own. They are important to speech because they mark or label the physical world. In “Russian Letter,” concrete nouns dominate: “glue,” “flies,” “clothes,” “plumes,” and “hawk.” They are augmented by occasional abstractions such as “soul” and “darkness.”

Verbs show up less frequently in the poem, but they have considerable impact. This is particularly true of what is arguably the most important word in the poem, “shrieks”: a horrifying action, adapted from a noun, the word evokes both the hawk’s sharp call and the precision with which it swoops in with its talons stretched out for attack. In a poem that, until this point, has been focused on philosophical statement and theoretical musing, that shriek cuts through with a sudden and frightening clarity. The other notable verb, which characterizes the first half of the poem, is a form of the verb, to struggle. Yau uses the word “struggling” to describe the ongoing human inability to act freely without encumbrance, which connects effort with futility and hopelessness. In effect, the abrupt swoop of the hawk as it “shrieks / down from the sky” is the opposite of the weighty pondering of the first half of the poem and the substantial nouns that are, in this poem, associated with the past.

Moreover, the contrast between arduous inaction and sudden, deadly action is linked to the division between the past and future. The first five stanzas analyze backward, focusing on the past’s ability to adhere to and determine the present. In effect, despite human efforts to the contrary, the past is as capable of cementing present circumstances as flypaper is to hold flies. Indeed the past is both fixed (in the sense that it cannot be changed) and fixing (in the sense that it holds in place). Though the logic might seem strained, this does make sense. For one thing, the past *is* frozen, in the sense that it cannot be changed. Moreover, a commonly held theory is that this relationship between the past and the present is inevitable and inescapable. If one believes that anything that is happening now is a result of factors established in the past, then one can conceptualize the past as gripping the present. Many people who believe in determinism, in original sin, or in fate might easily accept this image of the past as adhering to and controlling the present.

One concept of the present, though, is that as it unfolds (as the future is realized in it) the unanticipated and unknowable occur. Through current factors such as timing, coincidence, intersection, through the crosscurrent of opposing entities, events that are unpredictable occur. The shrieking hawk can swoop down into the field and snatch the unsuspecting mouse; risk and danger can unexpectedly and violently determine events. The pull of the past might tend to make life too predictable for the speaker’s tastes, but the speaker also recognizes that there is no real way of knowing what is to come either, and therefore the future always represents a certain potential for danger.

If the present were to have as much control of the future as the past has of the present, there would be nothing to fear: all possibilities could be determined. It could then be said that Yau is presenting a balanced equation, with the same effect distributed equally across the past, present, and future. But his whole point is that while some see the past as always a drag on what is happening now, the empirical fact is the future is unpredictable. These differing ideas do make sense, but they are not as tidy as a simple dichotomy would be. In a poem of so few words, Yau is taking a chance when he introduces a complicated idea such as this one.

There is one other dichotomy raised in the poem that serves to explain Yau's main point: it is the distinction between what could be referred to as "common knowledge" and the rare genius of certain individuals. Yau uses the phrase "it is said" twice. The phrase introduces an idea that comes with a certain authority or tradition of repetition behind it, an idea that has weight and is widely recognized and accepted by many. What "is said" is that life is trapped by the past. This is the concept that has wide acceptance. But the narrator in the poem cannot passively accept the statement, cannot go so far as to subscribe to it without pulling back and seeking some more moderate position.

The speaker in the poem does not support what "is said," at least not without qualification. He expresses his own disbelief, a matter of restraint: "I, however, / would not go so far" is the way he expresses his hesitancy to fully accept the idea. He does not entirely agree with this idea of being unable to resist fate, but he does not wholeheartedly disagree with it either. He has no clear, strong argument to offer in opposition to what is "said," but the idea of human beings being bound by the past just seems too extreme to be completely true for the narrator.

In opposition to what is said by authoritative and often quoted sources is the narrator who is unable to accept blindly or fully. Also in opposition to the narrator is someone as creative as, say, the artist Rembrandt who is a "master" of the "black / and green darkness" of the "hawk's plumes." The poem suggests that Rembrandt, since he could depict darkness and sudden unexpected events such as a hawk's swooping descent, must have been able to conceptualize the potential threat in the future. The shrieking hawk, harbinger of the unknowable that is just out of sight, is the kind of image Rembrandt was able to depict in his paintings. The suggestion may be that someone like Rembrandt would be able to control in art what is unexpected in life. Rembrandt sees the complexity of life so clearly that he is able to distinguish the blacks from the greens, and he is able to make beauty out of the mystery that others fear.

But the speaker of the poem says that, much as he might admire such mastery, Rembrandt's world is not quite the world he sees, either. The narrator resists believing in the idea of being trapped by the past, and he shrinks from claiming he is capable of capturing the future in an artistic medium. He appreciates the accomplished skill of Rembrandt, even though he is unable to match it.

The poem's finest achievement is its refusal to take an emphatic position in the philosophical debate. It is a work in tune with the contemporary audience. In another culture, at another time, the balance of anxieties would be tipped in a different direction.

For instance, the baby boom generation spent the late 1950s and 60s trying to shake off the numbed complacency that their parents acquired from decades of economic depression and war, so the threat of being held back by the past might have resonated more with them. “Russian Letter” was written in a time when the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York had given people across the United States the awareness that, though they had defined their destiny in one way, sudden attack could occur and disrupt the illusion of preordained safety.

Yau’s accomplishment here is in recognizing that conflicting ideas coexist. The balance might shift slightly, according to events, but it is a function of modern sensibilities that the past can be considered as much a threat as the future. Fear of being stuck in the past has become so prevalent that people not only worry about what is to come, they also worry about what has happened. Like all of the best poems, “Russian Letter” gives its readers a familiar feeling—given that one of its themes is the fear of being trapped by the past, this sense of recognition could backfire. But it does not.

The key is Rembrandt. If this poem were only a polemic on modern sensibilities, a lecture about opposing philosophical positions and the fears they evoke, readers would be left with nothing but gloom. The past, according to this poem, is something from which to escape, while the future is something to shrink back from with fear. When Yau introduces a greater artistic skill, he is offering a solution. The poem confirms that the present, despite being positioned between two unpleasant alternatives, does not have to be thought of as a waste or as a pending disaster. Rembrandt, a figure from the past, embraced the darkness, and in using him as a model the poem tells its readers that they can, too.

Overall, “Russian Letter” has a broader range of concerns than just identifying bad situations: for the most part, it says that life itself is a bad situation. By the end, though, it does offer a vision of hope, letting readers know that there is a sane path to follow, a way of looking at the world that will not fill people with despair or dread. If Rembrandt can make art of darkness, then darkness can at least be put to some constructive use. It is a powerful and convincing way to end such a terse poem. Some poems offer a vision of life: “Russian Letter” points readers in two directions that Yau wants them to consider anew. He trusts his readers to either understand his point or at least believe in the wisdom of a master like Rembrandt, as the poet himself clearly does, in order to realize that the current situation, however, dire can be transformed into art.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on “Russian Letter,” in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #3

Karmiol holds a Ph.D. in English literature and is a university professor. In this essay, she considers the importance of titles and what understanding the title of John Yau's poem, "Russian Letter," contributes to the readers' understanding of the poem.

In his essay, "Try Titles," Arthur Minton points out that "in a curious way titles partake of the nature of two kinds of expression that are otherwise incongruous—poetry and advertising." The title sells the poem to the reader, who after all has many poems from which to choose. Minton explains that "in poetry and advertising every word is heavy-laden; the whole effect depends on the balance of connotations, overtones, and colors." Writers choose their words carefully. Every word in a poem is carefully considered, laden with meaning and measured for effect. A title receives the same attention from the poet. The most interesting titles are ones that beguile and beckon, not promising too much but hinting at an enigma to be solved. John Yau's poem, "Russian Letter," presents his readers with a brief title that suggests simplicity but in reality delivers complexity. In his poem, "Russian Letter," Yau employs a title with a subtext that captures the author's love of abstract expressionism.

Understanding the title, and indeed the poem, requires the reader to accept Yau's challenge to forego rules and to think beyond convention. It also requires doing some research to uncover relevant information.

The title of Matthew Rohrer's 2002 profile of Yau's thirty-year writing career, "Where Art and Poetry Collide," identifies an important feature of Yau's poetry—the poet's efforts to integrate concepts from abstract visual art into his poetry. Rohrer describes how as a youth, Yau was friends with the son of Chinese abstract painter, John Way. This friendship stimulated Yau's interest in art, and as a youth Yau spent much of his free time at art museums. After college, he moved to New York City, where he began writing reviews of art gallery shows and began studying art criticism in a M.F.A. program at Brooklyn College. In his formal study of art, Yau no doubt learned that abstract expressionism began at least a generation earlier than the American art movement of the 1940s that first interested him. In fact, two of the originating artists were Russian painters, Wassily Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich. Kandinsky and Malevich initiated the style that came to be called abstract expressionism. They appear to be the Russian connection in "Russian Letter."

The word, "letter," in the title invites the reader to think about the nature of written communication. Letters convey messages. People write to others about their experiences and their views. In their content, letters relate memories, current circumstances and thoughts, and plans for the future. As a medium of exchange, a letter is written in one moment and then later, when it is received, it is read. One could say that the letter is time-bound in several ways: it contains the past, is written in the present, and is read in the future. Both in terms of the news they contain and the sequence in which they are composed and later read, letters move from the past to the

present. This means that letters make narrative. They communicate stories and their writing and reading are actions that might serve as events in a plot. In other words, letters participate in a time-bound frame, are part of narrative. This shift between moments in time connects to the content of Yau's poem, especially in the opening lines: "the past / sticks to the present." Yau's poem is a letter to his readers—but with a difference. Yau, as the writer of this letter, resists communicating what he thinks: he cannot agree to what is commonly said; nor is he the kind of artist that depicts objects from life as Rembrandt did. This resistance to communicate subject matter makes the poem abstract and thus there is a link here to abstract expressionism.

The avant-garde style, called abstract expressionism, became popular in the United States in the period just after World War II. Abstract expressionists focused on design, form, color, arrangement of shapes, but not on figures or objects. The emphasis in this style is emotion without narrative, in which the content is reduced to elements of shape and line. So for many new viewers, the work of abstract expressionists seemed to lack subject matter. Yau's debt to these painters is hinted in the title of another poem from *Borrowed Love Poems*. The poem that follows the six "Russian Letter" poems, is titled, "830 Fireplace Road." The poem title is, in fact, the Hampton, New York, address of American abstract expressionist Jackson Pollack. The poem is a fourteen-line sonnet, but in reality Yau composed only thirteen lines, since the first line is a quotation from Pollock. Just as Pollock broke the conventional rules about subject matter and technique (his paintings are filled with dripped lines), in this poem, Yau breaks the accepted rules for composing sonnets. Similarly, in "Russian Letter," Yau presents readers with what appears to be a letter that refuses to communicate, one written from someone who is not identified. Understanding the title, and indeed the poem, requires the reader to accept Yau's challenge to forego rules and to think beyond convention. It also requires doing some research to uncover relevant information.

It is the rejection of rules, both in painting and in poetry that appeals to Yau. Although poetry, especially free verse, may seem to be free of rules, in reality, poetry is governed by many rules about structure, meter, rhyme, language, and even—apparently—ethnicity. Yau rejects the label of Asian-American poet. Yau tells Rohrer that "If you are an Asian-American, as I am, many people expect you to write transparent or autobiographical poems, poems about garlic, soy sauce, ginger, etcetera." But Yau rejects what is expected in favor of the unexpected, which explains why he would appreciate art that disrupts viewers' expectations and refuses to give what is expected but gives something surprising instead.

Yau's attraction to abstract expressionism sheds light on the final six lines of the poem. The poet's sudden shift in line 15 to "Nor am I Rembrandt," initially seems incongruous with the lines that precede it. What has Rembrandt to do with the earlier idea that people struggle "to pull free" from the past? Yau's interest in abstract expressionism and the role of the Russian painters in this movement suggest reasons why the speaker in the poem does not identify with a seventeenth-century Dutch poet. Rembrandt's work is all about narrative. His portraits, interiors, and depictions of biblical scenes all evoke story. The speaker's assertion that he is not Rembrandt combined with Yau's interest in abstract expressionism suggests that Yau would not be able to envision himself creating

poetry reminiscent of the formality of Rembrandt's portraiture or his religious art. Yau's title adds just another layer to understanding the poem's content.

It is unlikely that Yau would want his poem defined by its title. The title serves as the introduction to the poem and to the poet, but that introduction should only hint at the composition that follows. In choosing the title for his poem, "Russian Letter," Yau acknowledges his debt to the abstract expressionist painters and embraces the notion that poetry can be as abstract as abstract expressionist paintings are. Both the painter and poet traverse the connections between image, word, and expression, and both kinds of artists find new ways to express their ideas. The emotional intensity of abstract impressionist art can be expressed in poetry, just as it can be expressed in painting. It makes sense then that the speaker reports what is commonly said, widely accepted, but he is unable himself to subscribe to the cliché. In his review of *Borrowed Love Poems*, Thomas Fink claims that Yau chooses "to dignify linguistic experiments that keep reminding us how slippery language is, how resistant it is to stable contextual framing." Yau's title is like this—slippery and resistant to conventional meanings.

Source: Sheri Metzger Karmiol, Critical Essay on "Russian Letter," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• Since John Yau, the author of “Russian Letter,” is also very much involved with art, imagine this poem in a visual art form. Sketch or paint an image that you think the poem inspires. Present your image to the class and explain how it arose from the poem.

• Yau can be compared to other poets, for example, Bob Dylan. Take one of the themes of this poem (freedom, change, nonconformity, time) and compare it to one of Dylan’s lyrics. (The book called *Lyrics*, published in 2005, contains Dylan’s poetry.) How similar are the images that these two poets use? Do they agree with one another? Is one clearer in his meaning than the other? Present your findings to your class.

• Present a PowerPoint display of Rembrandt’s paintings, suggesting how the painter might be referred to as a master of “the black and green darkness.” Research critical commentary on how Rembrandt used the darkness in his paintings and present both the images and the information to your class to more fully illuminate Yau’s reference to the artist.

• Write a melody for Yau’s poem and either sing or play the tune for your class. Then ask them to join with you, as you teach them the song.

What Do I Read Next?

- In his *Paradiso Diaspora* (2006), Yau continues his exploration of language and its shortcomings. However, a more personal side of the poet shows in this collection as Yau explores his relationship with his daughter, Cerise Tzara, to whom he dedicated his collection *Borrowed Love Poems*.

- In Yau's 2005 collaboration with artist Thomas Nozkowski called *Ing Grish*, the poet creates often humorous lyrics to go along with Nozkowski's abstract paintings.

- For a taste of Yau's prose, readers may enjoy his short story collection *Hawaiian Cowboys* (1995). Here are thirteen stories about strange characters that live outside the mainstream. They include exhibitionists, prostitutes, and heroin addicts. Sometimes sad and sometimes humorous, Yau's characters struggle with loneliness and frustration.

- John Ashbery won the Pulitzer Prize for his *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), a collection of poems that has been both praised and criticized. Ashbery's poems can be difficult to understand, but they are filled with beautiful and thought-provoking images.

- Frank O'Hara's influence on the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets is important; O'Hara's 1964 collection *Lunch Hour* is one of the best places to start for readers who want an introduction to his poetry. Using music, art, and movies, O'Hara explores his relationship with New York City and the people he encounters there.

- Founder of the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (from which the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets derived their name), Charles Bernstein is also a well recognized poet. His 2006 collection, *Girlie Man*, explores what one critic refers to as Bernstein's dedication to what poetry is not in order to find what poetry can ultimately become.

- David Citino edited *The Eye of the Poet: Six Views of the Art and Craft of Poetry* (2001), which contains the writings of six published poets who also teach poetry. One of their topics is the concept behind the works of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets.

For Further Reading

Addonizio, Kim, and Dorianne Laux, *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*, W. W. Norton, 1997.

Praised as one of the best books about creating poetry, teacher Addonizio and poet Laux help students understand and prepare for the process of writing poetry.

Henry, Brian, and Andrew Zawacki, eds., *The Verse Book of Interviews: 27 Poets on Language, Craft, and Culture*, Wave Books, 2005.

The editors present interviews with some of the world's emerging contemporary poets. The book covers poets from all of the world, including those from Australia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and Kashmir, as well as a strong representation of U.S. poets who are known for their experimental writings.

Schwartz, Gary, *The Rembrandt Book*, Harry N. Abrams, 2006.

Schwartz, one of the leading authorities on Rembrandt, provides a look into the life and work of the Dutch master. Over the centuries many controversies have arisen about Rembrandt, and Schwartz's research answers some of the more imposing questions.

Yau, John, *The United States of Jasper Johns*, Zoland Books, 1997.

An example of Yau's critical writing on art, this book examines the works of Jasper Johns, considered the father of minimalism in art.

Bibliography

Chen, Lisa, “Of Genghis Chan and Geishas: John Yau’s Work Defies Categorizations, Helps Define APA Aesthetic,” in *Asian Week*, Vol. 18, No. 34, April 17, 1997, p. 17.

Clover, Joshua, Review of *Borrowed Love Poems*, in *Artforum*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Summer 2002, p. 19.

Fink, Thomas, “Poetic I.D.’s,” February–March 2003, http://www.bostonreview.net/BR28.1/fink.html (accessed February 4, 2007).

Minton, Arthur, “Try Titles,” in *English Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 10, December 1938, pp. 809–10.

Rekdal, Paisley, “John Sees, John Writes, John Laughs: The Multi-Faceted Satiric Vision of John Yau,” in *International Examiner*, Vol. 30, No. 16, September 2, 2003, p. 16.

Rohrer, Matthew, “Where Art & Poetry Collide: A Profile of John Yau,” in *Poets & Writers Magazine*, Vol. 30, No. 3, May–June 2002, pp. 26, 28–29.

Shinn, Christopher A., “A Fresh Description of Old Expressions: *Forbidden Entries*,” in *International Examiner*, Vol. 24, No. 8, May 6, 1997, p. S29.

Yau, John, “Russian Letter,” in *Borrowed Love Poems*, Penguin Group, 2002, p. 3.

Copyright Information

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

Project Editor
David Galens

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

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

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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

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

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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

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:

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