Self-Portrait Study Guide

Self-Portrait by Adam Zagajewski

Contents

Introduction

Adam Zagajewski came to prominence in his native Poland during the 1960s as his country was suffering under the oppression of the Communist-controlled government. He and other Polish poets spoke out against the totalitarian system through their work, which was eventually censored, forcing many of them to emigrate to the West. As he and other Polish artists worked at a distance to free their country from political oppression, Zagajewski declared that art should focus on social realities rather than lyrical abstractions. Poetry then would be an informative vehicle that could engender change. After Zagajewski immigrated to the West in the late 1970s, however, his artistic attitudes shifted. He no longer believed that poetry should be subordinated to a political agenda and argued that it should instead reflect the individuality of the poet. The finely crafted poem □Self-Portrait,□ which appears in *Mysticism for Beginners* (1997), reveals the poet's shift in aesthetics in its focus on artistic expression at odds with historical experience. One of the most personal poems in the 1997 collection, □Self-Portrait□ shows the difficulties inherent in the struggle to find a clear sense of individuality separate from the external world of experience. As he details the objects in his world and his response to them, the speaker presents a moving portrait of loss and a stubborn insistence on his own distinct voice.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Polish

Birthdate: 1945

Adam Zagajewski was born to Ludwika and Tadeusz Zagajewski on June 21, 1945, in Lwów, Ukraine, a city that was occupied by and integrated that year into the Soviet Union. The family was forced, along with many others in Lwów, to relocate to Gliwice, a Silesian city that had become part of Poland. Zagajewski's father became a professor at a technical university. In 1963, after Zagajewski graduated from high school, he moved to Kraków, where he studied philosophy and psychology at the Jagiellonian University. In 1968, he was offered a position as a teaching assistant in philosophy at the Academy of Mining and Metallurgy.

In Eastern Europe, Zagajewski encountered much political turmoil, including the Polish student protests against restrictions on free speech in March 1968, the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet army in August 1968, the anti-Jewish purge of universities in Soviet-controlled countries in 1967, and the suppression of Polish workers' protests over restrictive labor laws in December 1970. Witnessing these events had a profound effect on Zagajewski and on other writers of his generation, who strongly supported the overthrow of the Communist-controlled government in Poland.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, Zagajewski became part of the New Wave poets, or Generation of 1968 poets, who promoted realistic language in their poetry and explored Communist philosophy and its politics in their work. Zagajewski was soon recognized for his involvement in a group called Teraz (Now) in Kraków. Zagajewski's participation in the New Wave movement is illustrated in his first poetry collections, *Komunikat* (The Communiqué, 1972), and *Sklepy mięsne* (Meat Shops, 1975).

Influenced by Czeslaw Milosz, an anti-Communist Polish poet who immigrated to California, Zagajewski became more political in his writings. In 1974, his critical manifesto *Świat nie przedstawiony* (The Unrepresented World) stated that contemporary poetry should have a political focus. During the 1970s, the Polish government censored the New Wave poets under accusations that their works inspired rebelliousness. This criticism and pressure caused Zagajewski and several other poets of his generation to become involved in politically defiant activities, such as protests and underground publications. Zagajewski had his works printed in one such publication, *Zapis* (Record), which first appeared in Warsaw in 1977. In 1978, Zagajewski's poetry collection *List* (A Letter) was published, also by the underground press.

In the late 1970s, Zagajewski's poetic focus shifted from politics to cultural and metaphysical themes. His *Solidarnośc i samotnośc* (1986), translated into English as *Solidarity, Solitude* (1990), was a warning against the type of political manifesto that Zagajewski had earlier written. In 1979, Zagajewski moved to Berlin, where he was offered a fellowship by the Internationale Künstlerprogramm. In 1981, he

was offered another fellowship, by the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. In 1982, Zagajewski immigrated to Paris, where he worked for the journal *Zeszyty Literackie* (Literary Notebooks) and eventually became a member of the editorial board. In 1988, he began teaching a creative writing program one semester a year at the University of Houston, Texas. In 1992, he accepted a fellowship for poetry from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Zagajewski's collection of poems *Mysticism for Beginners*, which includes □Self-Portrait,□ was published in 1997 and has become one of his most celebrated works.

Zagajewski's work has been published in English, French, German, Swedish, Norwegian, Italian, Serbo-Croatian, Slovak, Slovenian, Russian, Dutch, and Hungarian. He has received numerous awards and accolades, including the Kurt Tucholsky Prize of the Swedish PEN Club in 1985, the Echoing Green Foundation prize in 1987, the Alfred Jurzykowski Foundation Award in 1989, the Jean Malrieu Prize in 1990, the Vilenica International Literary Prize in 1996, and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 2004.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

The title of Zagajewski's □Self-Portrait□ suggests that the focus of the poem is the speaker's attempt to define himself. In line 1, the speaker identifies himself as a writer, as someone who spends half of his day writing with □a computer, a pencil, and a typewriter.□ In line 2, he makes a vague reference to time, when he notes, □One day it will be half a century.□ He does not say whether he means that one day he will be fifty years old, suggesting that he is approaching that milestone, or whether the half a century will mark the period of time that has passed since a particular important event. The event might be the date the speaker left his home and traveled to the first in the series of □strange cities□ to which he refers in line 3. The repetition of the word □strange□ in lines 3 and 4 implies that the speaker feels alienated in the places in which he now lives, among □strangers□ with whom he discusses □matters strange□ to him.

Lines 5-11

The speaker listens to music □a lot,□ and his preference is for classical composers□Bach, Mahler, Chopin, and Shostakovich. Still, the music does not seem to soothe him. The speaker finds weakness, power, and pain to be the main elements of the music. He declares that a fourth element of music is unnamable and turns to his interest in poetry and philosophy. The speaker gains more from poets, from whom he learns □tenacity, faith, and pride.□ He admits that he has a difficult time understanding the □precious thoughts□ of □the great philosophers.□

Lines 12-20

In lines 12-20, the speaker moves from descriptions of his personal tastes to descriptions of objects he sees during his walks. Paris is presumably one of the strange cities in which the speaker lives, and he declares that he likes to take long walks on the city's streets. He observes his □fellow creatures□ there and determines that they are driven by the emotions of □envy, anger, desire.□ In lines 14-16, the speaker suggests that these emotions are inspired by materialism as his focus shifts to a □silver coin / passing from hand to hand.□ He refers to the fading emperor on a silver coin, which may imply that loyalty to country is often supplanted by greed.

In lines 17 and 18, the speaker recognizes the perfection of nature in the form of green trees but suggests that he cannot articulate his relationship to it, because the trees are expressionless and □indifferent.□ The darker tone of nature emerges in lines 19 and 20, in which the speaker describes black birds pacing □like Spanish widows□ waiting for something, possibly death. Zagajewski may be referring to the image of Spanish widows, □waiting patiently□ for their sailors to come home from the sea.

Lines 21-30

In lines 21-30, the speaker shifts the focus back to himself. Perhaps thinking of his own death, the speaker notes that he is □no longer young□ but then states that others are closer to death than he is. The image of death is carried over into line 22, in which the speaker admits that he enjoys □deep sleep, when I cease to exist.□ This sense of disconnection from the world is reinforced in lines 23 and 24, in which the speaker expresses fondness for □fast bike rides□ on which objects around him disappear □like cumuli [clouds] on sunny days.□

The speaker enjoys art, as he does music, poetry, and philosophy, when he feels a connection to it. He notes his love for □gazing at [his] wife's face.□ In lines 28-30, the speaker expresses loyalty to his father and his friends, although he does not appear to gain pleasure through his contact with them.

Lines 31-39

In the poem's final section, the speaker writes of his feelings about his country. He is probably referring to Poland, Zagajewski's homeland, Communism being the □evil□ from which it □freed itself.□ The speaker hopes for another liberation, without identifying the type, and wonders what his role may be in this process. Refusing to make any commitment, the speaker insists that he is □not a child of the ocean,□ as Antonio Machado defined himself to be. (Antonio Machado y Ruiz was a Spanish poet and a member of the Generation of 1898 in Spain, a literary group that encouraged a link between politics and poetry, much as the Generation of 1968 had done in Poland.) Zagajewski's later poetry pulled away from the political themes of his earlier works, unlike that of Machado, whose focus was more consistently political. The metaphor of the ocean suggests this consistency. The speaker sees himself as separate from □the ways of the high world□ to which Machado belonged. He is instead a combination of □air, mint and cello,□ objects that reflect a more personal taste. The poem ends with the assertion of the importance of the speaker's sense of individuality.

Themes

Mysticism for Beginners

Mysticism for Beginners, the title of the collection that contains □Self-Portrait,□ denotes one of the main themes of the poem. As he strives to characterize his relationship with his world, the speaker admits that his immigrant status results in a sense of disconnection and alienation from his adopted, □strange□ city. This sense, however, is occasionally alleviated during moments when he is able to connect with the world through art. Music and literature offer him the promise of sublime moments of clarity, during which he can understand the power of pain and faith. His artistic sensibility also enables the speaker to see the □green . . . perfection□ of trees, but he has difficulty expressing the true nature of these mystical moments.

The speaker in □Self-Portrait□ is able to express articulately a yearning for and lack of mystical connection, as when he notes that there is a fourth element in music that □has no name.□ Similarly, the green trees impart □nothing□ to him but indifference. In this sense, then, the speaker is a beginner in the study of mysticism, focusing on the difficult process of gaining brief moments of transcendent clarity rather than ultimate enlightenment.

Exile

The speaker's sense of exile permeates □Self-Portrait.□ Throughout most of the poem, he does not identify his homeland or the reason for his emigration. The focus is on his feelings of rootlessness and alienation. The external world is □strange□ to him, peopled with □strangers□ with whom he fails to connect. His conversations with these people do not help him form new alliances, because what they talk about is □strange□ to him.

As he walks the streets of Paris, he observes passersby not as human beings with whom he may eventually feel a sense of solidarity but as □fellow creatures,□ filled with their own passions. In this state of disconnection, he likens black birds to □Spanish widows□ waiting for death, a state the speaker tries to mimic by falling into a □deep sleep□ and ceasing to live. Or else he bikes so fast that the images of houses and trees around him □dissolve like cumuli on sunny days.□

At the end of the poem, the speaker hints at the reason for his exile and suggests that he will never return home. Perhaps he has left his country to escape artistic censorship, before the country □freed itself from one evil.□ The speaker says that he does not know whether he will go home to help liberate his country, fearing the loss of his own individuality in the process. As a result, he commits himself to a permanent state of exile, living the life that belongs only to him.

Style

The poem contrasts public and private space to illustrate the details that the speaker considers in creating his self-portrait. He first describes a private space, possibly a home or office, identifying personal objects like □a computer, a pencil, and a typewriter,□ the necessary tools of his artistic expression. He immediately contrasts this interior world with a more public space when he notes that he lives in □strange cities,□ suggesting that the external world will also have an impact on how he defines himself. That impact becomes clear in his descriptions of his interaction with the public world. He characterizes himself as an exile, which has produced a sense of disconnection with this public world. His detachment becomes evident when he characterizes those who pass by as □fellow creatures□ and admits that he enjoys □dissolving□ his surroundings in fast bike rides. He returns to his private space as he listens to music or gazes at his wife's face, which can offer him moments of clarity. By the end of the poem, the speaker appears to have decided that he is defined by interior spaces, not the country that he has left or the new city where he now resides. He has not let the life that □belongs□ to him □cross paths□ with □the ways of the high world.□

Historical Context

Polish New Wave Poets

In the early 1970s, Polish writers who were influenced by the political events in their country in the late 1960s formed a movement called the New Wave. This group was made up of several diverse literary groups, among them, the Poznań group Attempts, which included Stanisław Barańczak and Ryszard Krynicki; the Cracow group Now, which included Zagajewski, Julian Kornhauser, Jerzy Kronhold, and Stanisław Stabro; and the Warsaw and Lódź group Hybrids, which included Krzysztof Karasek, Jarosław Markiewicz, Jacek Bierezin, Zdzisław Jaskuła, and Witold Sulkowski.

The disparate groups came together in a spirit of rebellion against artistic tradition. Tadeusz Witkowski, in the *Slavic and East European Journal*, notes that these poets, who also became known as the Generation of 1968, □rejected the concept of universal poetry, devoid of the concrete 'here and now,' poetry speaking in a highly literary language, exclusively utilizing allusion, metaphors, and abstract symbols.□ They discarded, according to Witkowski, □the concept of the poet isolated from social realities, the poet escaping from everyday life into a world of myth or even pure metaphysics . . . bypassing in silence the falsity present in the language of mass media.□ These poets also were united by their anti-Communist sympathies.

The New Wave poets initially had difficulty finding publishers in Communist-ruled Poland and had to turn to underground quarterlies such as *Zapis* and *Puls*, both of which were reprinted in the United States and the United Kingdom. The new poetic theories first appeared in a series of articles that later became collected in Zagajewski's *Świat nie przedstawiony* (Unrepresented World, 1974), written with Julian Kornhauser.

Most of the poets in the New Wave eventually emigrated because of the artistic restrictions they experienced in Poland. As a result, the subject of emigration began to appear in their poetry as they explored themes of alienation and dislocation, loyalty and abandonment. Zagajewski immigrated to Paris and eventually turned away from his previous insistence that contemporary poetry should address political issues. His new attitude toward individual artistic expression is outlined in his collection of essays, *Solidarnośc i samotnośc* (*Solidarity, Solitude*, 1990).

Poland and World War II

The world experienced a decade of aggression in the 1930s that culminated in World War II, a war that resulted from the rise of totalitarian regimes in Germany, Italy, and Japan. These powers gained control as a result of the Great Depression of the early 1930s and from the conditions created by the peace settlements that followed World

War I. The dictatorships established in each country encouraged expansion into neighboring countries. In March 1938, Germany annexed Austria and in March 1939 occupied Czechoslovakia. On September 1, 1939, one week after Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (also called the Treaty of Nonaggression), Germany invaded Poland, and World War II began.

The Polish people suffered greatly during the war. A large part of the population was massacred, starved, or placed in concentration camps. Approximately six million Poles were killed, and 2.5 million were deported to German camps. Polish Jews were almost eliminated from the country.

Political Turmoil in Postwar Poland

German troops completed their withdrawal from Poland in early 1945, and the socialization of Poland soon began. In 1947, Bolesław Beirut, a Communist Pole and citizen of the Soviet Union, was elected president by the Polish parliament. Soviet Marshall Konstantin Rokossovsky became minister of defense and commander in chief of the Polish army. In 1952, the constitution made Poland a model Soviet republic with a foreign policy identical to that of the Soviet Union. The government subsequently cut off relations with the Vatican, and religious leaders became the chief targets of persecution.

In June 1956, having become increasingly discontent with the Communist-controlled government, students and workers organized mass demonstrations and riots, which forced the government to abandon its more rigid policies. That same year, Władysław Gomułka was elected leader of the Polish United Workers Party and led a revolt against Soviet control of the country. Gomułka eased restrictions on personal freedoms and reestablished ties with the Catholic Church and the West. In the early 1960s, however, Gomułka strengthened his ties with Moscow and began a campaign to return to the restrictive policies of Communism. The student and worker demonstrations and riots that followed again influenced politics in Poland, as Gomułka was ousted and replaced by Edward Gierek, who brought back some of the freedoms enjoyed by the Poles under the early days of Gomułka's rule.

In the late 1970s, poor economic conditions in Poland prompted a series of antigovernment protests, which resulted in the establishment of small independent trade unions that organized strikes throughout the country. One such union, Solidarity, led by Lech Walesa, grew in membership to more than nine million, gaining so much support that the Polish government in 1980 agreed to all of the group's demands. In December 1981, however, the Polish leader Wojciech Jaruzelski reasserted government authority by declaring marshal law and imprisoning Walesa and thousands of other union members, sending Solidarity underground.

By the mid-1980s, after facing the continued passive resistance of the Polish people, the government eased its Communist mandates and started to release members of Solidarity from prison. The last Solidarity members were freed in 1989. Later that year,

Solidarity candidates began to win elections for government positions. By the end of 1990, the Communist regime in Poland had crumbled, and Walesa was elected president.

Critical Overview

Adam Kirsch writes in his review of *Mysticism for Beginners* that □the central problem of [Zagajewski's] poetry□ is that □the mystical experience is not loquacious□ because it is characterized by a □stillness.□ Kirsch argues, □What yearns to be expressed, rather, is the experience of waiting for the sudden heightening of consciousness; waiting for it, or remembering it, or lacking it.□ Kirsch determines that Zagajewski's goal is to write poetry □that is a concrete avenue to an invisible reality,□ requiring him to experiment with □poetic strategies and . . . poetic evasions,□ which □reveal a great deal about the possibilities of poetry today.□

Kirsch concludes that Zagajewski begins to answer the question □how can a poet□an intelligent, serious poet□write mystical verse now,□ in a modern age when □the presumption, even the suggestion, of a mystical dimension to life can seem anachronistic, an evasion of the real and secular responsibilities of the time?□ Kirsch praises the □quick and memorable absurdities□ that □temper the darkness□ of the poems and Zagajewski's □sophisticated and witty□ voice, which expresses □deep feeling lying just beneath the surface.□ Kirsch concludes that because □the mystic moment is indescribable, incommensurable,□ Zagajewski, in his search for this moment in his poetry, □is condemned to a kind of eternal recurrence of the same poem.□

Jacqueline Osherow, in her assessment of the collection for *Antioch Review*, writes that □it would be impossible to praise this book too highly□ and that □the poems seem effortlessly to arrive at the marrow of everything,□ from □living□ to □the intensely experienced present instant.□ As she reads the poems, Osherow reports that she thinks to herself □so this is what it is to be alive□ and □so this is how a person writes a poem.□ She concludes, □There are no tricks, no gimmicks, no fussiness, no elaborations. The authority of these poems arises from their exquisite accuracy.□

John Taylor, in his review for *Poetry*, praises □the engaging movement of these meditative poems, which meander gently toward moments of enlightenment□ and concludes that □our lives can briefly crystallize, [Zagajewski] movingly shows, in unexpected plenitude.□ Taylor finds Zagajewski □a subtle craftsman□ who □avoids ostentatious effects,□ as he □focuses on the deepest meanings.□ Taylor states that □the path to understanding necessarily remains untrodden; but its first turnings have been glimpsed by the attentive, self-effacing poet.□

A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* writes that the poems in *Mysticism for Beginners* are □mature□ and □accessible, written as much for the common reader as for other poets, and treat poetry as a savior, not as a tradition to struggle against.□ The reviewer finds □most poignant . . . Zagajewski's criticism of his own art and his distrust of its authority□ in the poems as well as their expression of a □long[ing] for a speech that can recoup something of the old anxiety and power, the gravity of wholehearted rebellion.□ In the concluding paragraph, the reviewer states that □this collection reconfirms the international status of a vigorous, ever-questioning voice.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, she examines the tensions between private and public, individuality and collectivism in Self-Portrait.

Zagajewski first gained fame as one of the leading poets of the New Wave movement, established by a group of Polish poets in the late 1960s. Tadeusz Witkowski, in the *Slavic and East European Journal*, notes that these poets were drawn together by a belief that poetry should be written in plain language but, more important, that it should □teach and stimulate thinking□ about contemporary □social realities.□ Zagajewski was one of the most vocal proponents of this poetic manifesto, as outlined in his collection of essays, *Świat nie przedstawiony* (Unrepresented World, 1974) and illustrated in his first collections of poetry, *Komunikat* (The Communiqué, 1972) and *Sklepy mięsne* (Meat Shops, 1975).

After immigrating to Paris, Zagajewski began to question his earlier position on the promotion of poetic didacticism, or poetry that aims to teach a moral, religious, political, or practical lesson. He began to focus instead on the troubling relationship between public and private worlds, between individual experience and history. His later poetry, including the celebrated □Self-Portrait,□ examines the sense of disconnection between the individual and the collective worlds. In □Self-Portrait,□ that sense of disconnection is revealed through the speaker's attempts to define and locate himself in relation to the here and now as well as to history.

The speaker identifies himself as a writer in the poem's first lines and focuses on the sense of time passing, suggesting that he feels a sense of creative urgency as he attempts to compose a self-portrait that will delineate his relationship to his world. This relationship is first mapped out in an external sense as the speaker defines himself as an exile who lives □in strange cities□ where he □sometimes talk[s] / with strangers about matters strange□ to him. The repetition of the word □strange□ denotes the speaker's feelings of disconnection and, as a result, a sense of alienation from the place and people with whom he is now in contact.

As he describes his interior space, the speaker suggests that he finds a sense of connection there that he has not been able to establish in his public world. Yet he struggles for a more complete understanding of the things that he values. He listens to music, specifically to Bach, Mahler, Chopin, and Shostakovich. The smooth assonance of the names suggests that the speaker gains comfort from these composers' works, yet he finds contrasting elements of weakness and power along with pain and a fourth element that he cannot name. If he could identify this final element, the speaker could experience the absolute connection, a mystical union between himself and the music. Ultimately unsatisfied, he moves on to poets, who teach him □tenacity, faith, and pride.□ The speaker finds more connection with poets than with philosophers, whose □precious thoughts□ he can only catch in □scraps.□

In line 12, the speaker moves back to the exterior world and his relation to it in more specific terms. He identifies Paris as the strange city in which he now finds himself, and his description of Paris embodies the polarities he experiences as he struggles to define himself. An ironic appreciation of Paris emerges as the speaker takes long walks on the streets and watches other inhabitants of the city. He regards them as □fellow *creatures*□ [italics added], noting their □envy, / anger, desire□ and greed.

The speaker's walks take him past the green perfection of trees. He longs to establish a sympathetic connection with the natural world in all of its multiplicity, as he tries to do with the music he listens to, but ultimately the trees express □nothing.□ Black birds become □Spanish widows□ waiting patiently for news of their drowned husbands, the striking metaphor suggesting the speaker's recognition of nature's more destructive aspect. He links himself to this image of death in line 21 when he admits that he is □no longer young□ but finds hope in the realization that □someone else is always older.□

In lines 22 to 24, the speaker suggests a world-weariness, almost a death wish that links to the images in the previous lines. He declares that he enjoys sleep so deep that he loses all sense of himself. □Fast bike rides on country roads□ allow him to lose a sense of his surroundings as well, when all objects □dissolve like cumuli on sunny days.□

The speaker's apparent desire for disconnection from a strange world is interrupted periodically by his visits to museums, where he can occasionally find inspiration from paintings. The paintings □speak to me,□ he declares, suggesting the possibility of intense moments of clarity, insight into the nature of existence and his relation to it. In these moments, the irony that complicates the speaker's creative vision with its insistent polarities □vanishes,□ and he can appreciate the beauty of his wife's face. These moments of transcendence are ephemeral, for soon he must return to the present, where he dutifully calls his father and meets with friends, □proving [his] fidelity□ more so than following any natural inclination for solidarity.

In his review of *Mysticism for Beginners*, Adam Kirsch finds Zagajewski □strangely inexplicit□ in these intense, transcendent moments that appear through his poetry. Kirsch argues that □we find a longing toward the mystical as the natural consummation of the private, the ahistorical□ in his work, but his speakers rarely achieve that state. Zagajewski □remains at the point of hoping that perhaps there is such a truth, though he will probably never comprehend it□ or be able to articulate it. Commenting on Zagajewski's focus on the relation between the public and the private, Kirsch writes, □when the collective no longer cares to direct the spirit . . . the individual is thrown back on his own resources, which very often turn out to be inadequate. Zagajewski is the poet of this situation.□

In the closing lines of the poem, the speaker reveals that history is the source of his sense of disconnection and his dark vision of the external world. He notes that his home country □freed itself from one evil□ but suggests that it is still experiencing another situation from which it must gain □liberation.□ The speaker never identifies the first evil, but readers can assume, given Zagajewski's own experience, that it is a reference to

the totalitarian takeover of Poland after World War II. The second situation is not identified as evil, but it is serious enough to require intervention. Refusing to allow politics to infiltrate his artistic vision, the speaker, and Zagajewski, will not name the evil.

The speaker's sense of dislocation becomes clearer in lines 31 to 39. He suffers the rootlessness of exile as well as of the patriot who refuses to return to his home. While recognizing that at home further liberation is necessary, liberation that must be generated by active supporters of freedom, the speaker questions his devotion to the cause. After asking □Could I help in this?□ he expresses doubt, admitting that he does not give his work a sense of activism, as others, such as the Spanish poet Antonio Machado, have done. Machado is a □child of the ocean□ who has established a political continuity in his work. The speaker is a □child of air, mint, and cello,□ refusing to devote himself exclusively to any cause. He instead insists on his individuality, his need to follow his own path, which does not cross with □the ways of the high world.□

Zagajewski's insistence on the individuality of creative expression generates a complex and often troubling universe for his speaker in □Self-Portrait.□ As he struggles to understand and express himself in his relation to the external present and historical experience, the speaker faces the inevitable tensions between private and public, individuality and collectivism. Within the darker specter generated by these polarities, the speaker sometimes experiences moments of clarity when he discovers a transcendent connection to his world. Through the voice of his speaker, Zagajewski expresses his belief in the transforming power of artistic vision.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on □Self-Portrait,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Read another of Zagajewski's poems from *Mysticism for Beginners* and lead a class discussion comparing and contrasting the poem's focus on mysticism to that of □Self-Portrait.□

Choose two New Wave poets and read a poem by each of them. Prepare a computerized slide presentation on their political themes. Give background information on the political topics addressed in the poems.

Write a poem or short story that could be considered a self-portrait of you.

Zagajewski outlined his attitude toward individual artistic expression in his collection of essays *Solidarity, Solitude* (1990). Read at least one of these essays and write your own essay summarizing Zagajewski's attitude about artistic expression and relating your conclusions to □Self-Portrait.□

What Do I Read Next?

Zagajewski expresses his thoughts on politics and art and the tensions between them in his collection of essays *Solidarity, Solitude* (1990), translated by Lillian Vallee.

Like *Mysticism for Beginners*, Zagajewski's 1985 collection of poetry, *Tremor*, translated by Renata Gorczynski, focuses on the intersection of public and private worlds.

Timothy Garton Ash's *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity* (2002) presents an absorbing, eyewitness chronicle of the 1980 Polish workers' rebellion against the Communist-controlled government and of the development of the Solidarity movement.

The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe (1993), by Gale Stokes, is a comparative study of the pressures that led to the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Many of the poems in Czeslaw Milosz's *New and Collected Poems: 1931-2001* (2003) focus on themes similar to those in Zagajewski's poetry, including exile and alienation. Milosz, a Nobel Prize winner, is one of Zagajewski's literary heroes.

Further Study

Hawkins, Gary, "Between the Quotidian and the Transcendent," in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 79, No. 2, August 2005, pp. 23-26.

In this essay, Hawkins applies Zagajewski's literary theories to his poetry, specifically his thoughts on irony.

Hong, Anna Maria, "Adam Zagajewski on the Power to Restore Beauty and Advice for Beginning Mystics," in *Poets and Writers*, August 13, 2004, available online at http://www.pw.org/mag/dq_zagajewski.htm.

In this interview, Zagajewski discusses his views of the relationship between poetry and the world.

Shallcross, Bozena, "The Divining Moment: Adam Zagajewski's Aesthetics of Epiphany," in *Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 2, Summer 2000, pp. 234-52.

Shallcross examines the sudden, intense experiences sparked by art in Zagajewski's poetry.

Witkowski, Tadeusz, "Between Poetry and Politics: Two Generations," in *Periphery: Journal of Polish Affairs*, Vol. 2, 1996, pp. 38-43, available online at http://www-personal.engin.umich.edu/~zbigniew/Periphery/No2/witkowski.html.

Witkowski traces the development of Zagajewski's poetics, from his early days in the New Wave to his later years as an exile.

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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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