Sentimental Education Study Guide

Sentimental Education by Mary Ruefle

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Mary Ruefle has become an important voice in contemporary American poetry, praised often for her fresh, inventive style. She has published several collections of her works, including *Tristimania* (2004), *Among the Musk-Ox People* (2002), *The Adamant* (1989, winner of the 1988 Iowa Poetry Prize), and *Post Meridian* (2000), which became one of her most successful. The poems in this collection reflect her whimsical treatment of language, her startling and often obscure images, and her exploration of the interaction between imagination and human experience.

In one of the best poems in that collection, “Sentimental Education,” Ruefle focuses on a classroom of children who must face a series of injustices as they interact with each other and with their teacher. The title of the poem, an allusion to Gustave Flaubert’s novel of the same name, is an ironic statement about the nature of education. In her construction of lists of each child’s loves and of the prayers that they recite in the classroom, Ruefle reveals how the students are confronted with the harsh realities of human experience and of traditional, parochial education, and how they learn to face these realities through active, imaginative engagement with their world.

Author Biography

Mary Ruefle was born in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, in 1952. She spent her first twenty years traveling around the United States and Europe with her mother and her father, a military officer. Ruefle earned a degree in literature from Bennington College in 1974. Upon graduation, she attended the writing program at Hollins College. She has been quoted as claiming that she began writing poems as soon as she could read.

Ruefle's work has appeared in numerous magazines and journals, and as of 2007, she was the author of seven books of poetry, including *Post Meridian* (2000), which includes "Sentimental Education," all of which have been well-received. Her poems have been anthologized in *Best American Poetry*, *The Extraordinary Tide*, and *Great American Prose Poems* and her collection *The Adamant* won the 1988 Iowa Poetry Prize. She also won fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. She won the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature and the Whiting Foundation Writer's Award in 1995. Ruefle has taught at Bennington College, Colby College, the University of Michigan, and in China. As of 2007, she lived in New England, where she was teaching in the M.F.A. in Writing program at Vermont College. She has also been a visiting faculty member with the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Plot Summary

Ruefle's "Sentimental Education" creates a classroom scene in which the students are reciting prayers, revised in terms of their own awareness of one another and the relationships that exist between certain students. In the first stanza, the speaker notes that Ann, a girl in class, loves a boy named Barry. In the second stanza, the class is asked to pray for someone named Lucius Fenn, who "suffers" while shaking hands, suggesting that he is painfully shy. It is not clear whether Lucius is a student in the class.

The third and forth stanza continue this pattern. In the third, the speaker claims that a girl named Bonny Polton loves a pug, which is a type of dog. In the fourth, the children are asked to pray for Olina Korsk, who is missing several fingers.

In the fifth stanza, the speaker notes that Leon Bendrix loves Odelia Jonson, but it seems as if his love is not returned since Odelia loves Kurt. Similarly not reciprocating in feeling, Kurt "loves Carlos who loves Paul." The love one boy feels for another could be an expression of friendship or a suggestion of homosexual feelings. In the sixth stanza, the students are asked to pray for Cortland Filby, probably a boy in class since his action of handling a dead wasp is described in the present tense. The wasp is "a conceit for his mother." Conceit is a literary device which draws a striking comparison between two extremely different things, in this case between the dead wasp and Cortland's mother. Since Cortland is not identified as having a specific problem, as Lucius and Olina have been, this prayer gives a vague sense that he may be troubled by something or that a boy with a waspish mother needs the prayers of his peers.

In the seventh stanza, the speaker notes Harold's pleasure in examining Londa's hair under the microscope. Similarly intrigued, Londa enjoys braiding her pony's mane. Fancy Dancer, the focus of the prayer in stanza eight, is likely the name of Londa's pony who "is troubled by the vibrissa [the stiff hairs growing] in his nostrils."

Stanza nine returns to the love Nadine St. Clair feels for Ogden Smythe who loves "blowing his nose on postage stamps." The directive for the prayer for William Shakespeare in the next stanza may come from a student who wants the children to think of him often or it may come out of the children's sense that the teacher wants them to appreciate Shakespeare's poetry.

In stanza eleven, Yukiko Pearl is said to love "the bits of toffee / that fall to the floor" as Jeffrey eats his snack.

The call for the prayer in the next stanza seems to come from one of the children who knows Marieko, a florist who rings up the wrong code for the flowers that he sells.

The focus shifts in stanza thirteen when the speaker notes that Muriel Frame is fixated on an event that occurred on "the afternoon of November third" and likes to talk about it. The year of the incident is not given. Ruefle chooses not to reveal the date's

significance to Muriel. According to the Roman Catholic Church, this is the feast day of several saints. The date also marks the day of independence for Panama in 1903, for Dominica in 1978, and the Federated States of Micronesia in 1986. But it is likely the event that fascinates Muriel is a more personally relevant one.

The call for prayer in the fourteenth stanza comes from one of the children who asks that classmates pray for their teacher who does not know even half of what the students know. She also appears not to recognize the suffering she has caused one of her students as described in the next stanza, or perhaps she does not care.

Ruefle breaks the couplet and contrapuntal pattern in the last two stanzas. In the fifteenth, the speaker describes a little girl who has been forced to sit in the corner with a dunce cap on her head. Her utter humiliation is apparent in her downcast face, her trembling chin, and her “fervent wish to die.”

One reading of the final stanza is that “it” refers to the “fervent wish to die,” and speaker wants that wish to be given “to the Tartars / who roll gloriously into battle.” In other words, let the wish to die be on the battlefield and not in the classroom. The word Tartars refers to a group of Turkic people from Eastern Europe and Central Asia who banded together in their invasion during the Middle Ages of central and western Asia and Eastern Europe. The term can also refer to a person with an irritable or violent nature, usually a female. The definitions could merge in a call for the girl’s sorrow and humiliation to be given to the marauding Tartars who might also be imagined as battling the forces that oppress her.

Themes

Lack of Awareness

Ursula Twombly, the children's teacher, who "does not know the half of it," may well not know the content of the children's prayers. Moreover, she appears not to notice the hypocrisy of the system that she supports. Part of the ritual in her classroom is the recitation of prayers to help alleviate the suffering of others. But the teacher seems not to recognize how her own actions have caused the suffering of the child singled out as a dunce. Ruefle may be suggesting that in order to devote oneself to the system by following convention, one must ignore the hypocrisies of that system. She may also be suggesting that the children's creative engagement with their world helps them to be more aware of it, unlike adults who require them to follow certain rules. The teacher's last name may be a child's mispronunciation of the name, Trombly, which suggests how young the children are. Ironically, they may be much more aware than their teacher is.

Compassion

The children show remarkable compassion for others considering that their teacher does not seem to model that virtue. In the prayers that they make up, they show concern for one child who is painfully shy, another who is missing several fingers, and for a pony that is "troubled by the vibrissa in his nostrils." Even the local florist who makes mistakes while ringing up his flowers gets their consideration, which reveals the children's sense that even adults make mistake and ought to be treated compassionately. The final prayer reveals the children's compassion for their clueless teacher even after she has caused one of them so much pain, revealing in addition the ability of children to forgive. Moreover, the children's prayers reveal their awareness of connections and relationships among themselves of which the teacher is unaware. It seems to be, also, that the children in their prayers are more inclusive than the teacher's formulaic prayer allows.

Style

Allusion

The title, “Sentimental Education,” is most likely an allusion or reference to *Sentimental Education*, a novel by Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880) which chronicles the life of Frederic Moreau during the time of the French Revolution of 1848. Through his depiction of Frederic’s experiences in Paris where the young man gains his “sentimental education” concerning the workings of society, Flaubert satirizes France’s social classes, customs, and political institutions by focusing on the moral corruption and hypocrisy that he finds there. Frederic, whom Flaubert presents as a representative of his generation, enters the privileged bourgeois society with a passive acceptance of its social order. Unable to think independently, he becomes a voice for social conformity and prejudices in his refusal to recognize the injustices committed by those of his milieu. The allusion to Flaubert’s novel could suggest a thematic link to the poem’s focus on injustice. Clearly, there is nothing sentimental (sweet and attractive) in the education these children are really receiving in the parochial school.

Repetition of Sound

The repetition of vowel sounds in the poem (a technique called assonance), especially in the lines that note one child’s love for another, are euphonious, or pleasant sounding. For example, Ruefle repeats the “a” in Ann Galbraith’s name as well as the “o” sounds in “love” and the boy Ann loves, Barry Soyers. The repeated “r” and “y” sound (a technique called consonance) in Barry’s name adds to the euphony. The “o” sound appears five times in the third stanza in its declaration that “B*o*nny P*o*lt*o*n l*o*ves a pug named C*o*wl.” (italics added). This pleasing repetition of sound intensifies the connection between the child and the beloved pet.

Repetition of Words

Words are repeated for emphasis in the poem. The two words most often repeated are “love” and “pray,” which reinforce the sense of the children’s devotion and compassion for each other. Another image is repeated for a different effect. In stanza twelve, the speaker describes Marieko the florist wrapping roses in a paper cone, an object that also appears in the penultimate stanza. When Ruefle describes the child’s dunce cap as a paper cone rolled to a point, she suggests what is wrong in the situation. Paper cones should be used for wrapping flowers, not for humiliating a child.

Liturgical Form

The word “litany” has two meanings: a series of prayers spoken or sung at a religious service, asking for God’s blessing; and a long list of complaints or problems. Ruefle

constructs the poem in the form of a litany, employing both definitions of the term. The poem moves back and forth from a list of children and the things that they love to a prayer. This serves two purposes: it reinforces the connection between the children and the disconnection between the children and the teacher who is directing them to pray. The pattern is broken at the end of the poem when the child is described sitting in the corner wearing a dunce cap, which reinforces the sense of isolation the child feels in being punished by being separated from the class.

Historical Context

In “Difficult and Otherwise: New Work by Ruefle, Young, and Aleshire,” Peter Harris determines that a good number of contemporary poets write obscure poetry that refuses to cater “to the illusive ideal of a ‘common reader’ who has a need to ‘get it.’” The goal of poets such as Leslie Scalapino (*Zither & Autobiography*, 2003), Mary Ruefle, Dean Young (*Skid*, 2002), and Joan Aleshire (*Litany of Thanks*, 2003) is, Harris maintains, to “elude closure, embrace discontinuity, celebrate polyvalence” (the use of language that can have more than one meaning). The poets in this group came to be known as “local” poets, writing poetry, Harris explains, for readers “who know how to break a particular code” in a poem and thus find meaning. Reading their poetry can be a frustrating experience, however, for those who expect the images of a poem to come together to provide them with a clear understanding of its themes.

In this sense, these contemporary poets echo the work of the modernist poets, including T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), Ezra Pound (1885–1972), and Wallace Stevens (1879–1955). These poets wrote for an elite readership that could understand the allusive nature of their work and appreciate the poets’ experiments with the dislocation of language. Modernists determined that continuity, a clear relationship between parts of the poem, did not accurately reflect the fragmented nature of experience and so refused to use transitions to facilitate the reader’s comprehension in moving from one image to another, creating a sense of disjunction in their work.

In his review of four collections of poetry, Stephen C. Behrendt argues that poems that were published in 1999 and 2000 exhibit a “remarkable sadness” which echoes that of the romantic poets, especially the poetry of William Wordsworth (1770–1850), who “paints Nature in darker tones than we usually think.” The romantic poets, including Wordsworth, Shelley (1792–1822), Byron (1788–1824), and Keats (1795–1821), were characterized by their devotion to the free expression of human emotions. They rejected the preference in the previous period for reason and instead promoted a return to nature and a contemplation of the beauty found there.

Behrendt likens the contemporary revolutionary age to that of the romantics two hundred years ago. While the poets he places in this contemporary group—Robert Wrigley (*Reign of Snakes*, 1999), Robin Chapman (*The Way In*, 1999), Dan Bellm (*Buried Treasure*, 1999), and Mary Ruefle—sound their sadness “in a new and particularly contemporary key,” they, like their predecessors, live “in no less troubled times, in a culture in which the future was no more clear than our own is.” The tensions of the Romantic Age that were expressed in its poetry were caused by such events as the French Revolution, which began in 1789; the rise of dissenting religious views; and the exploitation of workers during the industrialization of Britain. This period dates from the beginning of the revolution in 1789 to the death of Wordsworth in 1850.

Critical Overview

Hadara Bar-Nadav, in *American Review*, insists that Mary Ruefle is “at her best . . . wry, edgy, and infinitely surprising,” an assessment echoed by reviewers of the poems collected in *Post Meridian*. A review of the collection in *Publishers Weekly* states that the collection contains “elegantly worked poems” that slip “behind screens of language, dazzling the reader.” Noting the sometimes obscure nature of her work, the reviewer explains, “within the poems, Ruefle concocts circular patterns of sound that seduce the reader away from the hunt for logical development.” Yet, the review concludes, “Readers will find ample verbal threads here for their own happy picking.”

Mark Halliday, in his review of the collection, also comments on Ruefle’s obscurity, insisting that the first poem, “Perfect Reader,” stands as “a warning” to readers as they prepare to read the rest of the book. Halliday explains that this poem states: “*it is beautiful to try to be a perfect reader of poems. And you are fated to try. But your imaginative efforts will be tiring and endless*.” He finds though that the poems move “along in what seems a whimsical, impulsive way, but when we read [them] thoughtfully . . . we find ourselves inhabiting an emotional coherence.”

Stephen C. Behrendt writes in the *Prairie Schooner* that the poems in *Post Meridian* are “wildly exuberant exercises in fanciful juxtaposition, in the imagination let loose on a world of possibilities.” Behrendt determines that what sets the poems in this collection apart from Ruefle’s previous ones is “the very different route by which they arrive at their cumulative intensity.” He notes that “In these poems the oddly juxtaposed images resolve themselves again and again into an almost comforting texture rather than a discordant one.” They are, he claims, “lively in their language and voice, deft in their verbal variety” and “wonderfully detailed, their images sharp and crisp as woodsmoke in mountain air.” He concludes, “It takes an adept juggler as well as a crafty illusionist—and a skillful poet—to keep everything in motion and to maintain at least the illusion of a still-possible reassuring and restorative order.”

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of twentieth-century American and English literature and film. In this essay, she examines the theme of injustice and the interplay of the imagination.

Several critics have noted that readers often find Mary Ruefle's poetry inaccessible due to the seemingly irreconcilable images it contains. Much of the language of her poems is ambiguous, frustrating the search for meaning. Mark Halliday, in his review of *Post Meridian*, insists that when "confronting a poem, we often have to work hard to decide whether its oddity or difficulty comes from a wonderfully forgivable, or from a repulsive arrogance." Ruefle's "Sentimental Education" falls decidedly in the former category. Each of the stanzas contains separate statements that the reader must interpret. The reflective reader can find that under careful consideration, Ruefle's strikingly fresh and sometimes unnerving images come together to form a coherent, imaginative vision of the injustices of human experience.

One of the main kinds of injustice the children experience is the condition of loving someone or something that does not love them back.

In "Sentimental Education," Ruefle juxtaposes two types of litany in her inquiry into the nature and consequences of injustice as she centers on the parochial classroom experiences of a group of young boys and girls. She constructs prayers and lists based on anaphora, the use of the same word or phrase at the beginning of several sentences or lines, to emphasize her themes. Each item in the list opens with the name of a student and the repeated word, "loves," while each line of prayer begins with "Please pray for."

The title of the poem appears obscure unless we understand it as an allusion to Flaubert's novel of the same name, which focuses on a young man in Paris in the nineteenth century who is unable to gain a clear understanding of the injustices of his world; thus his education becomes "sentimental," as it reinforces convention, rather than challenging it. Flaubert, however, exposes to the reader the moral corruption and hypocrisy he finds in the social classes of the age by satirizing the young man's experiences. In the same sense, Ruefle exposes to her readers the injustices the children suffer while she suggests that the teacher, who is conducting a conventional "sentimental" education for them, is unaware of their condition.

One of the main kinds of injustice the children experience is the condition of loving someone or something that does not love them back. In a seemingly mundane sequence, Ruefle constructs lists that fix a distinct powerful emotion felt by the children. Their love is not actively rejected but it is not acknowledged by the objects of their affection. Leon, for example, loves Odelia, but she "loves Kurt who loves Carlos who loves Paul." This produces an ironic relationship between the children as each child who

loves reveals a strong connection to another while the unrequited nature of that love suggests rejection or at least indifference. The love that Kurt feels for Carlos and Carlos for Paul may suggest the young age of the children, their being in a stage in which boys and girls are as likely to form homo- as heterosexual pairs of friends. Or it could suggest a further problematic note if readers interpret it to suggest homosexual urgings, which could cause the children not only to feel cut off from the person loved but also from the society that dictates what kind of love is acceptable and what kind of love is not.

The children's feelings of affection for others are made more poignant by their incongruity. For some unknown reason, "Harold loves looking at Londa's hair under the microscope," while Nadine loves Ogden, whose only identifiable characteristic is "blowing his nose on postage stamps." Ruefle suggests that these children, along with Yukiko who loves to look at "the little bits of toffee that fall to the floor" from Jeffrey's snack, are able to engage on an imaginative level with the world, discovering significance that is not as apparent to adults, especially teachers who follow convention without examining the hypocrisies contained within it.

The children are required, as part of their conventional education to participate in the ritual of prayer in their school, asking for God's blessing for their loved ones and those less fortunate than they. Their ability to creatively envision their world prompts them, however, to individualize the prayers and so they become more meaningful. The prayers also reflect the injustices endured by others, including Okina, "who holds the record for missing fingers" and Lucius, whose shyness causes him to "suffer greatly."

Their final prayer is for their teacher, "who does not know the half of it," especially concerning the hypocrisy of the educational system in her classroom as well as the injustice it inspires. Ruefle breaks the contrapuntal pattern of her poem in the last lines to illustrate this point.

She uses straightforward free verse to describe a heartbreaking scene in the classroom. A little girl is forced to sit in the corner with a dunce cap on her head as a form of punishment. The child's utter humiliation over "having been singled out like this" is evident in her bowed head, her trembling chin, and her sincere and "fervent wish to die." Here Ruefle satirizes the conventions of an educational system that requires students to pray for the misfortunes of others while, at the same time, being actively responsible for the abject humiliation experienced by the little girl in the corner. The irony is compounded by the fact that the children are reciting their prayers while their classmate suffers.

The acute sadness that results from Ruefle's list of the injustices endured by the children is periodically relieved by her comic descriptions of their sometimes incongruous emotions and by the children's genuine concern for their classmates. This sadness is also relieved by the power of the imagination, especially regarding the little girl in the dunce cap. At the end of the poem, the speaker, perhaps voicing the children's directive, extols her to "take it away and give it to the Tartars." The "it" the speaker refers to could be the humiliation the child feels or her wish to die to escape her shame. Giving it to the Tartars, perhaps a subject they have studied in school, may

imaginatively eradicate the feelings. These marauders, known for their violent invasions of foreign lands, would take those feelings into battle with them.

In “Sentimental Education,” Mary Ruefle asks her readers to actively engage in the process of interpretation by opening themselves up to the unexpected in order to see things in a fresh way. She illustrates the power of imaginative engagement in her focus on the children in the poem, who are able to deal with the injustices that they experience through their playful, poignant, and ultimately exhilarating interaction with their world.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on “Sentimental Education,” in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Dyer holds a Ph.D. in English literature and has published extensively on fiction, poetry, film, and television. He is also a freelance university teacher, writer, and educational consultant. In this essay, he discusses "Sentimental Education" in terms of the philosophy of love introduced in the eighteenth century in the writings of Rousseau and Goethe.

The mid-eighteenth century saw the publication of two novels that changed dramatically the ways that writers and poets thought and wrote about love and romance. In Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), the longstanding cultural idea of love as either a contract that authorizes sexual relations or a financial arrangement was changed forever. These two novels imagined a new concept of love, one shaped more by emotion and spirituality than sex and money. Following the wide success of these novels, love was reimagined as an affair of almost religious intensity, marked by total devotion on the part of at least one partner, which inevitably seemed to necessitate remarkable sacrifices.

She is the unloved and the unwanted, a symbol of those people in the world for whom the passions *and* the sufferings of love remain forever a promise in poetry and novels.

Love in this new sense became a secular version of the intense passion that a religious person feels toward God. Glorifying the pain as well as the joys of a love relationship, this concept of sentimental love also celebrated relationships as commitments of a lifetime. Sentimental love suggested the idea that men and women in love should be considered equals: equally noble their spiritual connection, equally passionate in their sexual experiences, and equally free as intellectual beings.

Attached to this new view of love and relationships came a new understanding of human nature that prizes emotion and passion over reason as well as individual instincts over the social constructs of duty or civility. Rousseau had long insisted that people were naturally good, so removing the constraints of social rules and ethical frameworks was a freedom that he endorsed. Accordingly, he argued, love as an intensification of a natural feeling of goodness would simplify human relationships, serving as a kind of spiritual counterbalance to the corrupting taint of modern society, with its dogmatic attention to greed, power, and materialism.

Mary Ruefle gives many of these eighteenth-century ideas a contemporary spin in the aptly titled "Sentimental Education." In her opening couplet, for instance, Ruefle uses familiar expression that renders love as both an active, present tense verb ("loves") and an articulation of the emotion itself. In this sense, the statement "Ann Galbraith / loves Barry Soyers" is an *unpoetic* statement of the complex emotion of love. Such an

expression of apparent devotion, seen everywhere in contemporary culture from tattoos to bathroom graffiti, has become so familiar as to be cliché, that is, an expression that has been used so often that it has become stale and lacking in imagination.

But even with its staleness, this couplet expresses an idea or fact that is to be understood in definite terms. There can be no doubt in the mind of the reader about what it means. Moreover, the statement “Ann Galbraith / loves Barry Soyers” is a public announcement of a private feeling, much like children would use who spread gossip about one another. But unrevealed is whether Barry Soyers loves Ann Galbraith in return.

Goethe, in particular, was fascinated with the idea of love that is not reciprocated. His protagonist, Young Werther, presents an intimate account of his own unrequited love for a beautiful young girl, Lotte, who is already engaged to Albert. Werther spends months becoming a trusted friend of the couple, despite the suffering that he feels as his love for Lotte is reinforced and remains unreturned. After several failed attempts to disconnect from this self-destructive relationship, Werther writes a farewell letter, borrows two pistols from Albert, and kills himself.

From this opening couplet, Ruefle builds a series of couplets that move in two directions. Following the first path, the poem begins to take shape as a catalogue of the various tribulations that might befall the sentimental lover whose affection is not returned. For example, Leon Bendrix “loves Odelia Johnson / who loves Kurt who loves Carlos who loves Paul.” Then there is Harold who “loves looking at Londa’s hair under the microscope” but not necessarily at Londa herself, and Muriel Frame, who loves the story of “the incident / that happened on the afternoon of November third” so much that she recounts it incessantly, probably to the disinterest of her listeners. This poem is, as its title promises, an education in what people talk about when they talk about love in contemporary culture.

Following Ruefle’s second path through this poem, readers find alternating couplets that underscore the intersection in the sentimental model between love as an emotional, physical act and love as a devotional, spiritual act. The repetition of the opening words “Please pray” in the even number couplet stanzas (2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14) suggests the poem’s balanced emphasis on the notion of love and the religious devotions it might elicit.

Significantly, these devotional couplets, each of which invoke a plea to “Pray for” someone, use words associated with the sentimental lover’s heightened emotions. Such words as “suffers greatly,” “missing,” “dead,” and “troubled” balance with the possible joy of the interlocking stanzas, making suffering a component of love and love a component of suffering. As the fourteenth and final couplet of this opening series suggests, to understand only the joy side of love *or* the suffering side of love is to “not know the half of it.”

But Ruefle’s education does not end with this synthesis of love and suffering. Rather it moves in the fifteenth stanza of the poem, a septet (group of seven lines), to describe “a

little girl" who is isolated and unloved. She has been "singled out," for punishment and left to sit "by the radiator in a wooden chair" and wears "a dunce's cap." The girl sits with head bowed, "sincere in her fervent wish to die." She is the unloved and the unwanted, a symbol of those people in the world for whom the passions *and* the sufferings of love remain forever a promise in poetry and novels. While Werther and those who take him as a symbol of a sentimental education might long to die for love, Ruefle's little girl longs to die because she feels unloved.

The "it" of the final couplet, perhaps a reference to all of this girl's feelings, conveys the other children's hope that whatever hurts her will be taken far away by warring soldiers. The final couple seems to say, in effect, let the Tartars take that wish for death into the battle and leave this little girl free of it.

Source: Klay Dyer, Critical Essay on "Sentimental Education," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #3

Hart has degrees in literature and creative writing. In this essay, she examines Ruefle's poem to discover the underlying tone, dissecting the phrases to find the hidden emotions that are reflected in the images.

Ruefle's poem "Sentimental Education" is filled with a variety of emotions, from empathy to despair. Unlike the suggestion in the title, these emotions are not overly romanticized as the word "sentimental" suggests but rather are often understated. The success of this poem, which at first appears to be a random collection of childlike observations, is that the feelings are expressed almost as if the narrator is not even aware that she is exposing them. By using concrete nouns, such as the first and last names for the subjects of the narrator's observations, readers are led to believe that the poem makes literal sense and is only what it appears to be on the surface. However, by looking closer and examining what might be behind the narrator's choice of words and selection of images, the reader gains insight into the emotional content of this poem.

The young girl is completely overwhelmed by her teacher's inability to see her worth and wants nothing more than to die.

The first thing that one might notice in reading this poem is that the narrator speaks in the present tense. This places the narrator in the midst of the observations being made and thus suggests that the narrator is a child describing her classmates. Although some of the vocabulary (such as "conceit" and "vibrissa") are unusual for a child, there is an innocence present in the observations that suits the young student. Apparently, the emotions expressed or described are those of children. It is possible to imagine that the young narrator is capable of recording the events around her as she sees them without being able to completely comprehend their hidden emotions. Thus, the deep feelings expressed by the narrator come through as authentic.

The next thing the reader might notice is the distance that the narrator places between herself and the people who are the subjects of her observations. This distance is greatest at the beginning of the poem, where the subjects of the narrator's focus seemed removed from the narrator. As the poem progresses, this distance slowly disintegrates, and the emotions are fully expressed. For example, in the first two lines (or couplet), the poem reads: "Ann Galbraith / loves Barry Soyers." This is a simple statement. The narrator does not describe this love or offer any further insight into the two characters. In using both the first and the last names, the narrator suggests a schoolroom decorum where students are referred to by the full names. The children named are fellow classmates, and the narrator may be passing on rumors. But then in contrast to this observation is the one about Lucius Fenn, who "suffers." Suffering and loving both involve feelings, but the narrator offers more information about Lucius Fenn's suffering than she does about Ann and Barry's love. Lucius Fenn suffers "whilst

shaking hands." Although this too is a statement of fact, the narrator has intrigued the reader's imagination, leaving tantalizing gaps that the reader must fill in. First, there is the use of the word "whilst," which is an unusual word for a child. The reader might wonder if this is the result of the narrator's love of William Shakespeare (whom the narrator mentions later in the poem), an author in whose Elizabethan English this word is quite common. Another possibility is that the narrator is merely repeating the vocabulary of Lucius Fenn himself, who might have described his suffering this way. Is Lucius Fenn afraid to touch others? Is he shy? Withdrawn? Or is it the case that his own hands shake? Whatever the answer is, the narrator rouses empathy in the reader for Lucius, a response slightly stronger than that for the first two classmates mentioned in the poem. This rising emotional reaction continues to grow as the poem progresses.

The gap between the narrator and her classmates continues to narrow as the reader continues with the poem. "Bonny Polton" is also in love. But the object of her love is a dog, a "pug named Cowl." The word "cowl" gives the impression that Bonny Polton is to be felt sorry for in some way. The word "pug" is not quite as endearing as the word "dog," and the word "cowl" brings up images of a hood that covers one's head. Perhaps the narrator is suggesting that Bonny Polton might not be popular enough to have a boyfriend. That is one possibility.

The fourth couplet also presents a more serious departure from the first four lines of the poem, when the narrator brings up the image of Olina Korsk, "who holds the record for missing fingers." Whereas Lucius Fenn "suffers greatly" when he must shake hands, poor Olina may not be able to shake hands at all. Not only does Olina have digits missing from her hands, she holds the record for such a fact, which suggests the youthfulness and inexperience of the narrator who sees Olina's deformity as an extreme case or just uses that expression to convey the shocking nature of her deformity.

The reader's emotional response may intensify with the next few lines, with their depiction of unrequited love, with Leon loving Odelia, and Odelia loving Kurt, and Kurt loving Carlos "who loves Paul." There appears to be no reciprocation of love in either the seemingly heterosexual or homosexual attractions. Individuals are chasing others, who in turn are seeking love from someone else. It sounds a bit like a game of tag on a playground.

In the next line, there is a suggestion of another type of lack of affection. In the sixth couplet Cortland Filby is portrayed. Cortland's mother is compared to a "dead wasp." The word "conceit" here makes clear the extreme comparison between the mother and the insect. Whether he compares the stinger of the wasp, or the fact that the wasp is dead, to his mother, one could conclude that his relationship with his mother is definitely uneasy and uncomfortable. The fact that the narrator asks for prayers for Cortland implies that she knows that Cortland, like Lucius and Olina, is suffering. The fact that the narrator understands, or at least is aware of, this suffering suggests that the narrator is more familiar with Courtland's family life than she is in the lives of the characters when they are at home. As the narrator's emotional involvement increases, so too does that of the reader.

Through the next several couplets, the narrator's observations record less serious emotions. Harold loves to study Londa's hair under a microscope, and Londo loves to braid her horse's mane. The narrator then feels sorry for Fancy Dancer, presumably the horse, who is bothered by whiskers in its nose. The idea of the horse's nose leads the narrator to think of "Ogden Smythe / who loves blowing his nose on postage stamps." By this point in the poem, the word love has been used in many ways, even ridiculous ways like this one.

The narrator brings up the subject of the students' teacher, Ursula Twombly, in the fourteenth couplet. All of the observations that the narrator has made so far have been missed by Ursula Twombly, the teacher, "who does not know the half of it." One should note too that at this point of the poem the structure completely changes. The narrator has presented a picture of her classmates in circumstances and relationships that are not created by the teacher. The teacher is unaware of these circumstances, to the gossip the narrator is passing on about the class members. By contrast, one student's circumstances are the product of the teacher's actions: the child who sits in the corner wearing the dunce cap.

The girl has on "woolen stockings" but is sitting next to the radiator. Like the florist Marieko, mentioned earlier, this little girl is also involved with a "paper cone." Also like Marieko, this little girl has done something wrong. Unlike Marieko, though, who places flowers in a paper cone, this little girl is humiliated because she must wear the paper cone on her head. Marieko's mistake (punching in the wrong code) can be easily rectified, one can assume. The error might cause momentary hardship (frustration, possible confusion in inventory, and maybe even a loss of money), but the emotional consequences are nothing in comparison with this little girl's humiliation. This child, who sits with "her hands / in her lap and her head bowed down," has lost all sense of self-worth. She is fighting back tears, unable to look at all the other students; while her classmates are in a group, she is isolated. All this little girl wants is to die.

Readers might question why the narrator does not ask for prayers for this girl. Instead, the narrator asks the reader to pray for the teacher who must be indifferent to the pain of her students and especially unaware of the despair she has caused by singling out this child for punishment. A dunce cap implies a slow learner, someone who is too stupid to do adequate work. The young girl is completely overwhelmed by her teacher's inability to see her worth and wants nothing more than to die. If there is a slow learner in this poem, the narrator implies that it is not the little girl but the teacher, which makes the image of the little girl even more disheartening.

In the last couplet, however, there is a glimmer of hope. Like Genghis Khan who gathers the Tartars into his ranks as they spread out of Mongolia into Eastern Europe to conquer the lands, maybe this little girl is also ready to "roll gloriously into battle." Maybe her wish to die is not a gesture of surrender or a sign of defeat. Maybe her "sincere" and "fervent wish to die" can be turned into a willingness to fight on a battlefield to free herself from the unreasonable will of the adults who try to control her. Maybe while she sits on that stool, someone prays for her, and that prayer is to give her the courage to defy those who try to oppress her. In this case, the teacher's efforts, both in teaching the

children to pray and in enforcing some kind of discipline through punishment and example, fail. What is learned by these children has more to do with the circumstances of their separate lives and the compassion they feel for each other.

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

Topics for Further Study

• Read Ruefle's "When Adults Talk," which appears on the facing page in *Post Meridian*, and compare its treatment of the tensions between adults and children to those depicted in "Sentimental Education." Does Ruefle raise any different points in "When Adults Talk" about the problems of communication between the two groups? Write a paper in which you compare and contrast the two poems.

• Write an additional four stanzas in the same format (one stanza focusing on what one of the children loves; the other directing a prayer) that would fit the thematic focus of "When Adults Talk."

• Research the Tartar invasion of Asia and Europe during the Middle Ages. What details about the invasion could be related to the situation(s) in the poem? Make a presentation on your findings.

• Prepare to lead a class discussion on the obscurity of contemporary poetry. Present examples of work from other poets such as Leslie Scalapino (*Zither & Autobiography*), Dean Young (*Skid*), and Joan Aleshire (*Litany of Thanks*). You could also include a poem by a modernist such as Wallace Stevens (for example, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"). Organize a classroom debate about the value of poetry that is clearly not written for the common reader.

What Do I Read Next?

- Dana Gioia's "The Litany," which can be found in his collection *Interrogations at Noon* (2001), contains a series of prayers that make powerful statements of love and loss and reveal the search for a way to comprehend the nature of suffering.

- James Merrill's "Lost in Translation" (1974), collected in his *The Book of Ephraim*—one of a group of three books in Merrill's *Divine Comedies* (1976), is a complex study of loss and the artistic rendering of experience in its focus on the speaker's often painful memories of his childhood.

- Ruefle's "When Adults Talk" appears on the page facing "Sentimental Education" in *Post Meridian* (2000). The two poems share a similar focus: the separation between adults and children caused by problems with communication.

- Ruefle's "Cold Pluto" (1996), from her collection by the same name, focuses on the active role of the imagination in the contemplation of experience, which is a recurring theme in her work.

- Ruefle has admitted that she was most influenced by poet Wallace Stevens, whose work shares the same focus on the power of the imagination. His "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," which can be found in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1990), is one such poem.

Further Study

Flaubert, Gustave, *Sentimental Education*, Penguin Classics, 2004.

Ruefle borrows the title for her collection of poetry from Flaubert, who in this 1869 novel satirizes the conventions of bourgeois society.

Perkins, David, *A History of Modern Poetry*, Vol. 2: *Modernism and After*, Belknap Press, 2004.

Perkins examines the works of individual poets published up to the twenty-first century as well as important movements such as modernism, beat poetry, and confessional poetry. He notes the distinctiveness and the interconnectedness among the poets in these movements and addresses the critical response to them over the years.

Spiegelman, William, *The Didactic Muse: Scenes of Instruction in Contemporary American Poetry*, Princeton University Press, 2006.

Spiegelman finds parallels between contemporary American poetry and modernist poetry. His focus is on poets as teachers and how contemporary poets have embraced that role.

———, *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Poetry*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Spiegelman investigates how poetry makes connections between the word and the image and offers insight into the processes of reading and interpretation. He also explores how word and image are influenced by biographical and cultural factors.

Walch, Timothy, *Parish School: A History of American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial Times to the Present*, Herder and Herder, 1996.

The text presents a comprehensive overview of Catholic parochial education and its impact beyond the boundaries of the Church, including its influence on immigration and public education.

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Behrendt, Stephen C., Review of *Post Meridian*, in *Prairie Schooner*, Vol. 76, No. 13, Fall 2002, pp. 171, 176, 177.

Halliday, Mark, “The Arrogance of Poetry,” in *Georgia Review*, Vol. 57, No. 2, Summer 2003, pp. 220, 221.

Harris, Peter, “Difficult and Otherwise: New Work by Ruefle, Young, and Aleshire,” in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4, Autumn 1997, pp. 680, 681.

Review of *Post Meridian*, in *Publishers Weekly* Vol. 247, No. 2, January 10, 2000, p. 58.

Ruefle, Mary, “Sentimental Education,” in *Post Meridian*, Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2000, pp. 39–40.

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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