Silent Snow, Secret Snow Study Guide

Silent Snow, Secret Snow by Conrad Aiken

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Introduction

"Silent Snow, Secret Snow" (1934) is not only Conrad Aiken's most anthologized work, but also one of the most widely read twentieth-century American short stories. The story concerns the degeneration of its protagonist, a young boy named Paul Hasleman, into madness. Critics often view this story in light of Aiken's childhood, and search for autobiographical aspects to the work. Some interpret the story using a psychoanalytic framework; but it has been noted that the problem of the psychoanalytic interpretation is that it treats the events of the tale too clinically, diminishing the story's emotional power.

It seems that a valid interpretation of "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" can neither avoid purely psychological issues—the theme of child-parent conflict, for example—nor justifiably ignore the realistic tragedy of a twelve-year-old boy's world demolishedby madness.

Author Biography

In 1889 Conrad Aiken was born to parents of Scottish descent in Savannah, Georgia. In 1901, when he was eleven years old, Aiken's father, killed his wife and then committed suicide. Aiken lived with an aunt in New Bedford, Massachusetts, until he entered Harvard University in 1907. There, he studied with George Santayana, a renowned philosopher and poet. Santayana's philosophy emphasized the utility of human sensory perception and reason. This aesthetic reaction to the world also emerges in Aiken's own poetry and fiction.

Aiken wrote steadily in many genres, but preferred writing poetry and short stories. He also wrote several novels, including *The Blue Voyage (1927), Great Circle (1933), King Coffin (1935),* and *A Heart of the Gods for Mexico (1939).*

Aiken's poetry ranges from short lyrics to extended "symphonies," as he called them, to morestraightforward verse narratives. He received the Pulitzer Prize for his *Selected Poems (1929)* and a National Book Award for his *Collected Poems (1953).* As a poet, Aiken belonged to the modernist school, yet his verse was different from the work of Ezra Pound or Wallace Stevens. As a prose writer, Aiken tended to be more conventional, though such modernistic devices as stream-of-consciousness can be found in his work.

Plot Summary

Aiken divides "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" into four distinct sections. In section I, the story introduces Paul Hasleman, age twelve, a student in Mrs. Buell's sixth-grade classroom. Paul is distracted, however, by his intense memory of an event that occurred several days before. He thinks about the globe that figures in the day's geography lesson and hears Deirdre, the girl who sits in front of him, awkwardly answer a question about the definition of the term "equator." A few days earlier, Paul had the impression that snow had fallen; the sound of the postman's feet on the cobblestones outside his house suddenly sounded muffled. When he got up and looked out, however, the cobblestones were bare and there was no snow. Yet in his own mind, Paul is mysteriously aware of a "secret snow" that signals his growing sense of detachment from the real world.

Paul recalls that the sound of the postman's footsteps grow less and less distinct each day, and are audible only as the postman draws closer and closer to the Hasleman's house. Paul speculates about the necessity of keeping this strange knowledge from others and rehearses a family conversation over dinner as if he were practicing a play. Meanwhile, in the classroom, Mrs. Buell talks about the seventeenth and eighteenth-century search to discover the Northwest Passage. When Paul rouses himself sufficiently to successfully answer a question about Henry Hudson, Deirdre turns in her chair to smile at him with "approval and admiration." At last the bell rings for dismissal.

In Part II, Paul is on his way home from school. He thinks about the secret snow and how difficult it is to drag himself out of bed each morning when all he wants to do is stay in bed. For Paul, the world grows increasingly more alien, incomprehensible, and repulsive. For example, he takes inventory of the items in a dirty gutter, and stares at tracks left by a dog in the sidewalk when the cement was freshly poured. He then arrives at his own house and is troubled by the thought that it is the sixth house from the corner, when he had all along supposed it to be the seventh. The house seems strange as he comes inside from the street.

In Part III, after supper, Paul's parents grow concerned about their son and call in a doctor to examine him. Paul regards the examination as an inquisition, and becomes emphatically defensive. During the exam, Paul hears the secret snow. The pressure of the doctor's questions forces Paul to admit that his recent state of distraction stems from constantly thinking about the snow. His parents react negatively, and Paul fails to understand the full impact of his revelation.

In Part IV, Paul rushes to his bedroom. The whiteness of the snow has become overwhelming. He now views his mother as a "cruel disturbance," a hostile intruder as she tries to help him. He rejects her defiantly as he finally slips away:

"Mother! Mother! Go away! I hate you!"And with that effort, everything was solved, everything became all right: the seamless hiss advanced once more, the long white wavering lines rose and fell like enormous whispering sea-waves, the whisper becoming

louder, the laughter more numerous."Listen!" it said. "We'll tell you the last, most beautiful and secret story—shut your eyes—it is a very small story—a story that gets smaller and smaller— it comes inward instead of opening like a flower— it is a flower becoming a seed—a little cold seed—do you hear? we are leaning closer to you—"The hiss was now becoming a roar—the whole world was a vast moving screen of snow—but even now it said peace, it said remoteness, it said cold, it said sleep. (Excerpt from "Silent Snow, Secret Snow")

Part 1

Part 1 Summary

Silent Snow, Secret Snow takes place during just one day, although it uses several flashbacks to fill in the narrative. The short story is set almost entirely in the mind of a young boy, Paul. As the story opens, he is sitting in school during a geography lesson. As the class discusses continents and the equator, Paul is barely aware of what is going on around him. Instead, he is pondering his big secret. At first, the reader is not sure what this marvelous, important secret is. Paul is focusing on how the unknown secret started. It began on a December morning, as he lay in his bed listening for the postman. Every morning, Paul could hear the postman come around the corner, as he got closer to Paul's house. However, that morning, he did not hear him come around the corner. In fact, he did not hear him until he had come to the first house on the street. The steps were softer. Paul realized that the footsteps were being muffled by snow. Paul stayed in bed with his eyes closed, for he did not need to see the snow to know it was there. He remained still and listened to the snow and the resulting silence it brought to his street. Knowing the snow was outside made him feel safe, relaxed and very comfortable. Much to his surprise, when he finally looked out the window, there was no snow! The cobblestones were bare, just like every other morning. Paul wondered if he could have been dreaming while entirely awake. However, he liked the snow and was content to feel it the next morning and every morning thereafter. As he sits in class thinking, it becomes clear that this snow, that only he can see and hear, is his secret.

Paul continues to recount how it all unfolded. As the days grew on, Paul could hear the postman's footsteps less and less. First, he could hear them when they reached the second house on his street, but the next day he could not hear the footsteps until the postman had reached the third home. Each day, the sound of the approaching postman became more muffled. A few days into the wondrous snowfall, Paul's mother began to notice he was no longer listening when spoken to. Paul himself began to realize he existed in a state of "mute misunderstanding" of the world around him. He was leading a double life. One part of him had to struggle to get dressed, eat breakfast, go to school and talk to his parents and teachers. The other, much more pleasant part of his life, allowed him to luxuriate in his secret snow and ponder how it all came to be:

"These thoughts came and went, came and went, as softly and secretly as the snow; they were not precisely a disturbance, perhaps they were even a pleasure; he liked to have them; their presence was something almost palpable, something he could stroke with his hand, without closing his eyes…. The snow was much deeper now, it was falling more swiftly and heavily."

The narrative moves back to the classroom. While Paul plays over every detail of the snow in his mind, his teacher calls on him to answer a question. He stands up and answers correctly. However, he is mostly lost in his "daydreams." Paul continues to sit in class, wondering if he should tell his parents about his secret snow. His mother has

threatened to call a doctor. He wants to tell his parents but he feels he must keep his secret place to himself. Finally, the school bell rings and he hears the snow. He rises to leave, just slightly slower than the girl in front of him does.

Part 1 Analysis

Silent Snow, Secret Snow starts with a mysterious questioning of how the secret entered and changed Paul's world. The fact that the reader does not immediately know the "secret" is snow does not really matter. It is the "secret" and the need to keep it that starts to drive Paul mad. Therefore, Paul could have been obsessing about any object, real or imagined. The snow itself is secondary to its effect on Paul. In fact, he does find other things to obsess about, which also help separate him from the world around him. For example, he fixates on how the freckles on the neck of a classmate look like a constellation of stars.

However, the snow pulls him deeper into his pleasing fantasy. Every day, Paul recounts repeatedly exactly when he could hear the postman's approaching footsteps. Each morning, they become increasingly muffled. This obsession with the sound of the postman's boots symbolizes his decent into insanity. As the sound of the boots fade, so does Paul's grasp of reality.

All hints to Paul's schizophrenic state come from Paul himself. The only view of Paul from the outside world can be surmised from comments directed at Paul as his parents, doctor and teacher notice his strange, dreamlike state. Therefore, reality to the reader is only shown through the prism of Paul's troubled mind. However, Paul is not so insane that he does not realize to some extent what is happening to him. In fact, he is able to answer his teacher's question correctly when she assumes he is not listening to her.

His geography lesson symbolizes the two worlds Paul now inhabits. The real world is portrayed in the teacher's lifeless globe and boring questions. In his fantasy world, Paul is the explorer in an enchanting land. He ponders this new double life and knows people are worried about him. Their worrying concerns Paul, but the secret snow is more important to him than the people around him are.

Part 2

Part 2 Summary

Paul enjoys his walk home. The afternoon feels timeless and he is happy to think about every facet of his secret snow. He does stop obsessing about the snow long enough to notice ugly details of the real world, such as the "deltas of filth" in the gutter.

Again, he thinks about how he would like to be kind to his mother and father and to spare them from worrying over him. However, he is certain he must be resolute and not tell them about the snow. The snow has become beautiful, yet paralyzing. He thinks that nothing has ever given him so much pleasure. As he counts the houses on his street, he arrives at his own door. He is shocked and worried to discover his home is the seventh house, which is the only house he heard the postman go to this morning. Paul becomes disturbed thinking that it is all over. Perhaps tomorrow he will hear nothing.

Part 2 Analysis

Paul's awareness of the filthy gutter only further contrasts his perceived grimness of the real world with the loveliness of his snowy, fantasy world. Now, as he becomes confused about the number of houses on his street, he is symbolically becoming more confused about reality. His dream world is encroaching a little further. His steps home mirror his steps toward complete madness.

Part 3

Part 3 Summary

It is the same day, but now it is after dinner. The doctor has arrived to examine Paul and try to determine what is making him act so strangely. He checks his mouth, eyes, heart and lungs. Paul answers the doctor's questions the best he can, trying hard to make everything sound normal. He does not want to give away his secret. Yet, even as he talks to the doctor, he can see the snow invade the room, hiding in the corners. The snow is talking to him now, saying that when they are alone, it will tell him a story and pile high against the door to keep every one else out of his room.

As Paul listens to his snow, he continues to talk to the doctor. He answers the doctor's questions and tells him that he is not worried about anything. The doctor, unable to get a believable answer from Paul, questions him more sternly. Finally, Paul says, "I'm just thinking, that's all." His mother repeatedly asks him what he is thinking about and Paul finally reveals his secret. " About the snow," he says. The look of horror on his parents' faces makes him desperate to leave the room. He turns and runs up the stairs.

Part 3 Analysis

Paul is watching the doctor examine him as if the procedure is something entirely separate from him and he is watching it from a distance. He is even amused by the doctor's tests and questions. His secret snow makes him feel superior to the doctor and his parents. They do not know what he knows. Paul is glad that their questions will not uncover his secret and will have no affect on his snowy world. The reader knows by the questioning that Paul's parents are truly concerned for his wellbeing, but to Paul, the doctor's visit begins to feel like an inquisition. When Paul fears he has given away too much information, he must retreat into his snowy fortress. The snow is increasingly cutting him off from people who care about him and severing his emotional ties to others.

Part 4

Part 4 Summary

Once in his room, the snow starts coming faster and is getting deeper. The snow tells him to "Listen! Lie down. Shut your eyes, now- you will no longer see much- in this white darkness who could see, or want to see? We will take the place of everything… Listen-"

Paul starts to succumb to the wonderful snow, when suddenly a bright light interrupts him. His mother has come to the door. He screams at his mother to go away and tells her that he hates her. Suddenly, everything else disappears. He is left alone with the snow. The whole world turns into nothing but snow and cold sleep.

Part 4 Analysis

The story reaches a climax and takes on a more frantic tone as Paul arrives in his room, ready to return to his world of snow. He is anxious to fall deeper and deeper into its grasp. When the door opens, he must choose between his mother (the real world) and the snow (his secret world.) By screaming at his mother, he severs his final important tie to reality. With his mother out of his mind, he can slip further into the obliterating snow. The story ends as it begins: entirely within the confines of Paul's increasingly troubled mind. As Paul is closed off from reality, the reader is closed off with him. One can only assume he has slipped into total insanity and is now unreachable to the outside world.

Characters

Deirdre

Deirdre is Paul's classmate. She sits at the desk in front of his. She is not a fully developed character, but her gesture of turning around to smile admiringly at Paul when he answers a question correctly is girlish. Deirdre has freckles on her neck and delicate hands; she is a stereotypical "first love" for a young boy verging on his teens.

Doctor

The doctor is the first to suggest that Paul is suffering from some sort of mental illness. Initially he gives the boy a physical examination. Then, announcing that the problem might be "something else," begins a psychological examination.

Mrs. Hasleman

Mrs. Hasleman obviously cares for and is worried about her son. In the first part of the story, she worries about Paul's condition and speculates that he suffered from "eyestrain." To remedy this, she buys him a new lamp. She tells him one evening that "if this goes on, my lad, we'll have to see a doctor," and she continues reading a magazine, laughing a little, "but with an expression which wasn't mirthful." When she finally understands the seriousness of Paul's mental illness, she falls silent and her mouth "opens in an expression of horror." After he has vanished upstairs to his room, Paul views his mother as a monster chasing after him, though she is merely a terrified parent seeking to save her son from his illness—a task in which, as far as the reader can tell, she fails.

Norman Hasleman

Paul's father, Norman Hasleman, is as concerned as his wife about Paul's welfare, but he is more reticent about expressing his emotions. He also exhibits some impatience with the boy. During his examination by the doctor, for example, Paul recognizes what he calls his father's "punishment voice," which the reader may interpret as a sign that the father is the disciplinarian of the family. Paul's description of the voice as "resonant and cruel," however, may be attributed to his increasing dementia rather than to reality.

Paul Hasleman

Paul Hasleman, age twelve and presumably in the sixth grade, lives in an American town, probably in New England. Prior to the onset of his madness, Paul was an ordinary boy, good at geometry, and excited about geography. At first he is considered

introspective, but it is soon clear that he is detached from reality; this alienation is metaphorically represented in this story as the secret snow.

As the disturbance takes over, Paul feels terribly lonely. As his sickness triumphs, Paul becomes distinctly paranoid regarding the "gross intelligences" that surround him. He only vaguely understands the pain that he is causing others.

Paul's Father

See Norman Hasleman

Paul's Mother

See Mrs. Hasleman

Postman

The first indication of Paul's mental disturbance comes when the usual sound of the postman's footfalls on his early morning rounds are deadened as if by a fresh snowfall. The sound of the muffled footsteps and the fatality of his knock suggest a classic personification of death—if not clinical death, then the death-to-the-world that constitutes psychosis.

Themes

Sanity and Insanity

In "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," sanity is defined as the ability to function in the everyday world and interact with people. Conversely, insanity is measured by the degree to which one is unfamiliar with everyday occurrences and the inability to communicate with others. Deirdre's eagerness to answer Mrs. Buell's geography question is evidence of her sanity. The globe that figures in Mrs. Buell's geography lesson is a symbol for the real and everyday world in which people, as they mature, become increasingly interactive. In contrast, Paul's desire to avoid reality and seek refuge in the sheltering snow is indicative of his increasing behavioral abnormality.

Truth and Falsehood

Saneness may be defined in "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" as a person's ability to distinguish between the truth and lies. Paul's parents are concerned that he is no longer his true self. The doctor investigates the truth of Paul's altered condition; Mrs. Buell teaches the accumulated significant truths about the world to her students; Deirdre admires Paul and flashes her smile to indicate, truthfully, that she is fond of him. Falsehood, on the other hand, is linked to insanity in the story. Paul labors to conceal his knowledge of the snow.

Love and Hatred

Love involves valuing, cherishing, and voluntarily assuming responsibility for another person. Love can also be directed toward institutions or things, like a job, a house, or a dog. Paul loved his parents, but his madness erases his feelings and eventually causes him to reject his mother. Hatred inverts love, for it closes rather than opens personal relationships, and thrives on suspicion and selfinvolvement. Hatred dissolves the bonds that unite people and in its very intensity constitutes a disturbance of the mind.

Community and Alienation

Community consists of a conscious sharing of values and things. In "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," the schoolroom and the family home symbolize community; Deirdre attempts to establish a more intimate community with Paul by indicating that she admires him for correctly answering a question. Alienation is a disconnection from those shared bonds of community. For Paul, this happens when the snow alters his view of the world and at last obliterates it.

Style

Lyricism

Aiken brought the poet's sensibility and craft tohis fiction. He narrates "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" from Paul's point-of-view; this perspective guarantees that the author's stream-of-consciousness prose style will affect readers directly. Not surprisingly, one finds a large number of lyric poems in Aiken's verse. Aiken also utilizes the material properties of words. For example, the pervasive alliteration, with its repeated "s" sounds, already appears in the story's title. In addition, Aiken manages to endow his prose with the naturalness of colloquial speech.Although couched in the third person, Aiken's narration remains faithful to the linguistic style of a twelve-year-old boy.

Grammar

In "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," Aiken's depiction of insanity begins at the grammatical level.In the opening paragraph, for example, Paul thinks of the snow—the initial stages of his madness—and refers to it with the pronoun "it": "Just why it should have happened, or why it should have happened just when it did, he could not, of course, possibly have said" (emphasis added). The personified "it," then, becomes a thing.

Point of View

Aiken provides Paul's perceptions, as when he stares at the debris in a muddy gutter: "In the gutter, beside a drain, was a scrap of torn and dirty newspaper, caught in a little delta of filth; the word ECZEMA appeared in large capitals, and below it was aletter from Mrs. Amelia D. Cravath, 2100 Pine Street, Fort Worth, Texas, to the effect that after being a sufferer for years she had been cured by Haley's Ointment. In the little delta, beside the fanshaped and deeply funneled continent of brown mud, were lost twigs . . . dead matches, a rusty horse-chestnut burr, a small concentration of eggshell, a streak of yellow sawdust . . . a brown pebble, and a broken feather." Aiken does not need to add commentary, since the very randomness of the objects correlates to the randomness of Paul's inner disturbance.

On the other hand, every item described in the gutter metaphorically describes Paul's worsening condition; eczema is an irritating skin condition; a broken feather indicates a bird's inability to fly; and a broken eggshell may suggest the fractured wholeness of a personality.

The reader should note, finally, that Aiken's consummate usage of the whiteness of the snow may indicate the annihilation of Paul's consciousness. This whiteness joins with the cascade of sibilating S's at the end of the story to convey Paul's descent into madness.

Historical Context

The Great Depression

"Silent Snow, Secret Snow" appeared in 1934, the second year of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's first term in office. America was also in the midst of the Great Depression, which disrupted American life, put many people out of work, and left many impoverished. Other nations were affected: Britain, France, Italy, and Germany also suffered from high inflation and unemployment. A fascist government, put in power because of its promise to restore national order and stabilize the economy, had achieved power in Italy in 1922. Another fascist government was established in 1934 in Germany as the Nazis gained control. England, too, had its totalitarian movement around this time, when Oswald Mosley formed the Union of Fascists, the so-called "Black Shirts."

National Mood

In the United States, on the other hand, there was continuing progress in industry and technology. Although not everyone in 1934 could afford them, a variety of new household conveniences— such as refrigerators and electric ovens—appeared. Air travel increasingly competed with train travel, and radio, the first great mass medium, had come into its own. President Roosevelt's "Fireside Chats," broadcast nationally, brought the country closer together.

Literary and Artistic Trends

Around 1934, there were two important trends in American literature. There was the social consciousness movement of writers like John Steinbeck, who portrayed the lives of ordinary people during hard financial times. There was also the modernist movement, as exemplified by the poetry of Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens, or the novels of John Dos Passos.

Rejecting the literary conventions of the nineteenth century, the modernist movement concerned itself with formal experimentation and deliberate disorientation of the reader, often by fragmenting narration into dislodged and discontinuous sections. Modernism also appeared in the non-representational schools of painting and sculpture, as well as in atonal music. Advocates of modernism claimed that the "alienation" aspect of the movement accurately reflected the world—human consciousness was becoming progressively detached from its origins.

Critical Overview

Given the interest in the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud in the 1930s, it is not surprising that early interpretations of "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" examined the story from that perspective. Leo Hamalaian provided an early example of psychoanalytic analysis in his "Aiken's "Silent Snow, Secret Snow"' of 1948. Frederick Hoffman's 1957 study of *Freudianism and the Literary Mind,* which devotes considerable space to Aiken's fiction, is another case in point, although it should be added that Hoffman later de-emphasized the Freudian aspect of his reading of Aiken.

Psychoanalysis still influences readings of the tale. As late as 1980, Laura Slap invoked the Oedipus complex as the unconscious theme of Aiken's story: "My thesis is that Paul Hasleman's illness is a reaction to his realization of his parents' sexual activity." When the doctor asks Paul to read a passage from a book taken from the shelves, the passage happens to be from Sophocles' play Oedipus at Colonus. This permits Slap to work the Oedipus theme into her discussion.

Some critics have avoided the psychoanalytic approach in favor of a purely aesthetic approach, inspired by the fact that Aiken considered himself a poet first and a prose-writer second. An example of the aesthetic, or formalist, approach is to be found in Elizabeth Tebeux's "'Silent Snow, Secret Snow': Style as Art" (1983). In the essay, Tebeaux discusses Aiken's careful usage of such poetic devices as ambiguity and polysemy (the endowing of one simple word with many meanings, each of which depends on a particular context); she also looks closely at the use of rhythm and alliteration as a means of reproducing the feelings that accompany Paul's descent into madness. According to Tebeaux, "focusing only on Paul is to miss the most remarkable literary aspects of the story. Combining sense and symbol and rhythm and tone and sound, Aiken uses his poetic skills to draw the reader into Paul's world."

A more recent tendency is to deconstruct the story by making a deliberately counter-intuitive interpretation. Such interpretations turn insanity into a positive; Paul's behavior is viewed as a symbolic breaking away from an oppressive society and the restrictive bonds of community and family. As such, Paul's growing individuality and independence is seen as insanity. Ann Gossman and Jesse Swan both exemplify this critical trend. Gossman's thesis is that "Paul's withdrawal is not psychopathic, but rather the alienation of the artist from society." Gossman argues that what we mistake for Paul's madness is his flowering "as an artist" or seer who "must die" rather than "'mature' into perhaps another Mr. Hasleman." While admitting that the "reasonable modern reader naturally seems to recoil from accepting" what she calls "Paul's choice" to embrace madness, Jesse Swan nevertheless contends that this same "modern reader" might actually resent "Paul for having the courage" to turn his back on the world and enter the secret, artistic world of the snow.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Bertonneau is a Temporary Assistant Professor of English and the Humanities at Central Michigan University, and Senior Policy Analyst at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. In the following essay, he surveys the various critical interpretations of Paul's mental disturbance in Aiken's "Silent Snow, Secret Snow."

Critics do not interpret Conrad Aiken's short story "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" (1934) in a literal way. Upon initial examination, they consistently regard the story as something other than what it is. Thomas L. Erskine, for example, in his 1972 psychoanalytical interpretation of the story, claims that "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" is about the "balance" between "two worlds" and the "discovery" that results by leaving one to enter the other. For Erskine, each of young Paul Hasleman's deformed or defamiliarized perceptions of the world amount to an "epiphany," an intense vision with deep symbolic meaning.

Appreciating the story on purely aesthetic grounds, Elizabeth Tebeaux calls attention to Aiken's work, stating that he "enables us to feel some of the magic and terrifying wonder that the snow world, whatever it is, offers Paul." Tebeaux concludes by noting that the story "will more than likely continue to be enjoyed long after the nature of Paul's problem has ceased to be of any psychological interest."

Moreover, Jesse Swan maintains that we are not to believe that Paul is insane, because madness is a label applied in an arbitrary and oppressive manner. Similarly, Ann Gossman referred to Paul's parents, and to the whole adult world in the story, as "philistine"—an extreme judgment.

Paul Hasleman, the protagonist of "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," suffers the terrible fate of having his life annihilated by a "fixed idea," or an overwhelming obsession. What should one say about those critics who attempt to convert the tragedy into something other than what it is by claiming that Paul's condition corresponds to something other than what the evidence dictates?

Starting from the fact, however, that Aiken understood the effects of insanity—his father killed his mother and then himself in a psychotic fit, and Aiken himself later attempted suicide—I believe that readers need to understand that Paul's disturbance may never qualify as an experience through which he might live and personally or artistically profit, but that his collapse is simply the end of all of his conscious experiences.

Aiken has something in common with Edgar Allan Poe, an earlier American short story writer, who also struggled with madness and wrote about it in such stories as "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "Ligeia." In the former, insanity is rooted in guilt, while in the latter, it assumes the form of an evil entity.

The term "possession" appears in the first paragraph of "Silent Snow, Secret Snow." The setting is Mrs. Buell's sixth-grade classroom during a geography lesson. Paul ignores her, and instead concentrates on his growing obsession with the snow: "It was

like a peculiarly beautiful trinket to be carried unmentioned in one's trouser pocket—a rare stamp, an old coin, a few tiny gold links found trodden out of shape on a path in the park, a pebble of carnelian, a seashell distinguishable from all others by an unusual spot or stripe—and, as if it were any of these, he carried around with him everywhere a warm and persistent and increasingly beautiful sense of possession."

All aspects of Paul's state of mind in regard to his "possession" may strike the reader as sinister foreshadowings of the story's climax. Even at the grammatical level, Aiken's use of the nonspecific pronoun "it" to designate the encroaching psychosis carries a frightening connotation, for a thing that cannot be named cannot be fully understood. Thinking of "it" as a seashell with "an unusual spot or stripe" admits to the oddness of the condition but does nothing to pinpoint or solve it. Thinking of "it" as a broken chain of gold links "trodden out of shape" also anticipates the subsequent breakup and deformation of Paul's mind, not to mention the sundering of his family.

At this early point in the story, Aiken deliberately confounds the idea of possession. Does the word designate an item which one owns, or does it designate an involuntary state to which one submits? Paul mistakenly thinks that he possesses "it," when "it" really possesses him. Moreover, "it" has already drawn Paul out of his world, out of the world in which healthy people live and love. When Deirdre gives an unwittingly silly answer to one of Mrs. Buell's questions, Paul does not join in the laughter—not because he disapproves of it, but because the madness has already abstracted him from the generality of the classroom community.

The scene with Deirdre in part one of "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" tends to slip past in the parade of Paul's confusion, although it offers one key to understanding the story. What Paul notices about Deirdre is not that she is an eager student, willing to rise to answer questions, but that her neck sports a "funny little constellation of freckles . . . exactly like the Big Dipper." Paul has failed to see the full, human Deirdre, and instead reduces her to an anomalous blemish. Aiken skillfully interweaves Paul's autistic inner monologue with brief intrusions from Mrs. Buell's lesson (sometimes reported parenthetically). At one point during the story Mrs. Buell gently admonishes Paul that if he stopped daydreaming he might answer a question about Henry Hudson's success or failure in finding the Northwest Passage. Paul rouses himself momentarily to correctly respond that Hudson "was disappointed." As he sits down, "Deirdre half turned in her chair and gave him a shy smile, of approval and admiration."

Setting all theories aside, consider what Deirdre's smile means in the context of a sixth-grade classroom. All of the children have begun to take an interest in the opposite sex, and all are quite shy about admitting to it. Admitting to such an interest before the eyes of one's classmates is usually dreadful, but Deirdre does just that, spontaneously turning to smile shyly and approvingly at Paul. We cannot discount the episode, for it constitutes a moment of healthy adolescence in that the girl probably wants to establish intimacy with the boy. It is an opportunity for Paul to experience the world of adolescence. The "exploration" theme implied by the geography lesson about Henry Hudson, I would argue, refers to the potential romance offered by Deirdre. Paul's

madness prohibits any such exploration and any such issue from childhood from taking place. Paul's madness, then, robs him of the possibility of love.

It is suggested that Paul's mental distraction has multiple consequences, for he has become slovenly and neglectful. He has not, for example, recently polished his shoes because (as he rationalizes) "they were one of the many parts of the increasing difficulty of the daily return to daily life, the morning struggle." Paul's declining interest in and growing aversion to the world is very much a sickness, with physical as well as psychological symptoms.

The attraction that Paul ought to feel toward Deirdre is directed toward the hallucinatory snowstorm: "He loved it—he stood still and loved it. Its beauty was paralyzing—beyond all words, all experience, all dream. No fairy story he had ever read could be compared with it." The reader needs to remember, however, that "it" does not exist. At the same time, the snowstorm strikes him as "faintly and deliciously terrifying," a reaction that belongs to that vanishing part of him that is still sane. The psychosis will soon rob Paul of his memory—a terrifying prospect, although Paul will not be able to recognize it as such. When he arrives at the gate of the family home, for example, and sees the stenciled H (for Hasleman), he fails to understand its import.

The final terror comes after Paul is examined by the doctor. Paul feels compelled to divulge the secret of the snow and then, in a panic, he runs upstairs to his bedroom and throws himself into bed. The snow begins to speak to Paul, telling him: "Lie down. Shut your eyes—you will no longer see much—in this white darkness who could see, or want to see? We will take the place of everything."

In conclusion, readers of "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" need to be wary of the numerous interpreta tions of Paul's affliction. Psychoanalytic approaches tend to reduce the full humanity of the event. More recent approaches which rely on making insanity into something other than what it is, also deserve to be regarded with skepticism. Aiken did not regard insanity either as a purely theoretical or desirable phenomenon. His understanding of insanity might be described as existential, although that, too, is an oversimplification. Perhaps one should simply say that Aiken is a profound observer of the human condition, a lover of life, and a writer who can lead us to appreciate life by giving us the example of someone who loses life by losing his mind.

Source: Thomas Bertonneau, Overview of "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Swan discusses the major themes of Aiken's "Silent Snow, Secret Snow."

In "Senlin: A Biography" and "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," Conrad Aiken explores the psyches of two people, one an old man, the other a child, who seem to be confronting something much larger than they are. In both pieces, the central figures experience something to which no one else seems to be sensitive. As this experience is uncommon, the depiction of it demands uncommon material. Aiken succeeds in presenting these nebulous experiences by carefully casting silences in his work. Aiken's silences surround man, embody man, and are embodied by man. They also resemble the Christian God in their ubiquity as well as their comprehensiveness. In both pieces, Aiken tries to communicate the import of these silences, and he does this by stretching our consciousness to include the edges of our minds. Although "Senlin" is an early poem of Aiken's and "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" is a later short story, both rely on silence to convey their intendment. Realizing that Aiken employs silence in "Senlin" and develops that employment in "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," we not only develop a greater understanding of Aiken's *Weltanschauung*, we also perceive new possibilities for reading Paul Hasleman's confrontation with the silent snow. . . .

Silence motivates the events of Aiken's greatest work, his short story, "Silent Snow, Secret Snow." Like "Senlin," "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" is an investigation of a psyche that involves much more than only the psyche. Indeed in an even more developed fashion, "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" reveals a struggle that, it appears, Aiken believes we all experience. Some dismiss the confrontation with silence in the story as puberty or madness. However, since the silence in the story develops the silence of "Senlin," it appears that this story, like the poem, depicts a serious confrontation with eternity, with truth, with silence.

A common temptation is to view the silent snow negatively. Paul, we may be tempted to say, is going mad. This conclusion, however, is one that Mr. and Mrs. Hasleman would form. Paul knows that he cannot tell his parents about his silent snow, "No—" he thinks, "it was only too plain that if anything were said about it, the merest hint given, they would be incredulous—they would laugh— they would say 'Absurd!'—think things about him which weren't true. . . ." And clearly the parents would think him insane, but we are not to do so. The parents are "gross intelligences . . . humdrum minds so bound to the usual, the ordinary" that they cannot experience something "irrational." This description from Paul's point of view, if not wholly accurate because of its extremity, does represent the parents' general character. Perhaps it is inappropriate to be so harsh on the parents for being "normal," but they clearly are normal. The parents notice a change in their son's usual, acceptable character and think that something must be wrong with him. If they knew that he was listening to silent snow, they *would* think him mad. They do not see it, so, for them, it is not there. Like any good parent, they decide to call in an authority—the family physician.

The physician epitomizes the typical adult. We believe that there must be a "rational" explanation for everything and that the world is a rationally understandable environment. Anything supernatural cannot be accounted for and is therefore relegated to the realm of "irrationality," "madness," and the like. The parents believe this as does the physician. The physician asks Paul, "Now, young man, tell me,—do you feel all right?" When Paul tells him that he feels fine—indeed Paul feels exceptionally well because of his silent, secret snow—the doctor performs a physical survey of Paul which includes Paul's reading from a passage of a book.When this reveals nothing out of the ordinary, "silence thronged the room", and the doctor asks Paul, moving to a psychological survey assuming that if nothing is physically wrong, something psychologically must be wrong with Paul, whether there is "anything that worries you?" Since Paul's answer remains "No," the doctor becomes exasperated and exclaims: "Well, Paul! . . . I'm afraid you don't take this quite seriously enough". The doctor has given Paul numerous chances to declare himself mad, but since he does not, the doctor concludes that Paul is not only mentally troubled but unacceptably obstinate. Thinking about the doctor's and the parents' actions and portraits, it seems that Paul is not so unreasonable. Concluding that the story is about a boy "whose mind finally breaks down" [Edward Stone, *Voices of Despair: Four Motifs in American Literature, 1996]*ignores the possibility, if not fact, that the parents and physician are blind, insensitive and thereby negative agents in the story and that the silent snow and Paul's embrace of it are the positive agents. Such a narrow reading reveals that the readers, like the parents, are "so bound to the usual, the ordinary . . . [that it is] impossible to tell them about" the positive beauty and peacefulness of the silent snow. These readers, like the parents and the doctor, have pushed away the silence which surrounds them and have chosen to embrace the rational, language-centered world. Paul, many try to conclude, is mad, and the parents and doctor, they silently assume, are the standard by which to judge sanity and madness.

That the silent snow is positive not only provides additional support for reading the story as a representation of one of Aiken's favorite points in human development, it also seems rather obvious to the unprejudiced reader. From the very beginning the silent snow is a pleasant experience. In the opening scene where Paul is in class, we find out that

he was already, with a pleasant sense of half-effort, putting his secret between himself and the [Miss Buell's] words. Was it really an effort at all? For effort implied something voluntary, and perhaps even something one did not especially want; whereas this was distinctly pleasant, and came almost of its own accord.

Although this can be read negatively, as a sign of Paul's ensuing madness, a more positive reading suggests itself as well. The silent secret comes on to Paul, perhaps as "madness" does "a schizoid personality" [William M. Jones, *Explicator,*18, March 1960], but also as nature's breezes and soothing sounds do. A breeze is not an effort, but we often feel a half-effort to experience it fully. Like the silent secret, a breeze is not voluntary and it is often pleasant. Hence, the silent secret snow is not ipso facto madness and therefore negative. In fact, it seems really quite a positive experience for

Paul, much like a mystical experience must be for a devout Christian or a cognitive insight for a critical theorist.

The development of the silent, secret snow seems to provide further evidence that the snow is a positive force. As in "Senlin," the silence is first a quality that characterizes as well as surrounds, and second it is an entity itself. The silence in the story characterizes the snow which comes to surround Paul's world and then becomes "the most beautiful and secret story" in the end. In class, Paul contemplates the fact that

All he now knew was, that at some point or other— perhaps the second day, perhaps the sixth—he had noticed that the presence of the snow was a little more insistent. . . . There, outside, were the bare cobbles; and here, inside, was the Snow growing heavier each day, muffling the world, hiding the ugly, and deadening increasingly—above all—the steps of the postman.

The snow is "hiding the ugly" of the world much like Percy Bysshe Shelley claims poetry does in his *A Defence of Poetry* [Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, eds.,*A Defence of Poetry: the Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1965].* Shelley claims that "Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed. . . . It sub dues to union under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches. . . ." The snow, then, may resemble poetry. If the snow resembles poetry, is Paul a poet? Perhaps, but since Aiken concerns himself with Everyman and not just artists, it seems more likely that Paul is an Everyman. The snow may be poetic without Paul being a poet if the silent snow is universal truth that poets, children, and old people are sensitive to.

If the snow is universal truth that includes both the rational and the irrational, as it is in "Senlin," the significance of its "deadening increasingly— above all—the steps of the postman" may be ambiguous. The postman has been seen as representing death as well as, more modestly, "the plain ordinary world in which small boys have to get up, eat breakfast, go to school, listen attentively, and do all the other things expected of small boys" [Ballew Graham, *English Journal*, 57, May 1968]. The more modest view seems more appropriate especially if we see the silent snow as positive. If the snow hides what is ugly, as poetry does, it would muffle the sound of the postman since the postman is "the bringer of information from the outside world" (Jones). The postman, with the parents and the doctor, becomes associated with the adult and loud world that has chosen to ignore the silent truth Paul decides to embrace. By incessantly assaulting the beauty of Paul's newly discovered world with news from the adult's mundane world, the postman must be silenced by the purifying silent snow.

The silent snow, after imposing itself on the world, reveals the essential silent entity that embodies everything. Toward the end of the story, when Paul is being interviewed by the physician, the silent snow becomes an entity that "Even here, even amongst these hostile presences, and in this arranged light, he could see the snow, he could hear it—it was in the corners of the room, where the shadow was deepest". The snow occupies the corners— the fringes—of the room much like silence encompasses the edges of sound. Moreover, this silent snow tells Paul to resist his parents and the doctor so that it

can provide him with "something new! Something white! Something cold! Something sleepy! something of cease, and peace, and the long bright curve of space!" This is a rather tempting promise to make, especially when contrasted with what the parents and the world they represent offers him.

The end of the story presents Paul's realization of the silent secret of the universe. The silent snow exclaims:

Listen! . . . We'll tell you the last, the most beautiful and secret story—shut your eyes—it is a very small story—a story that gets smaller and smaller—it comes inward instead of opening like a flower—it is a flower becoming a seed—a little cold seed—do you hear? We are leaning closer to you.

This statement, compounded by the closing line that describes the snow becoming a fierce "moving screen of snow—but even now it said peace, it said remoteness, it said cold, it said sleep", leads many readers to conclude that Paul dies, that his death wish is fulfilled. But the scene has other possibilities, as Jay Martin notes that "we seem always about to break through to the truths contained in the 'secret' snow. But we never, in the story, transcend the snow itself, whose meanings remain secret" [*Conrad Aiken: A Life of his Art*, 1962]. Secret they remain to those who, as "reasonable" adults, embrace only what can be understood with mere human language. The snow's depiction of the secret as a flower growing inward back to the beginning of life seems more positive than what is normal—i.e., a flower growing outward and dying! If the secret grows inward it can grow outward again, and repeat this cycle infinitely. The secret that grows inward is related to the silence that developed before Paul dashed up to bed. That "silence seemed to deepen, to spread out . . . to become timeless and shapeless, and to center inevitably . . . on the beginning of a new sound." Hence, we have the most beautiful and secret story; namely, we have the story of the dynamics of eternal life. Life grows out to grow in, indefinitely.

There is certainly more to it than this. However, as the meaning is obviously ultimately silent, all that any of us can do is approximate the truth.Approaching the truth is what Aiken does best. He takes us to the edge of our minds momentarily innumerable times in his poetry and fiction. Senlin has been recognized as a character who probes the problem of understanding who we are. However, Paul, because he is a child, has received incomplete recognition. Like Senlin, Paul is encountering silent truth. Like Senlin, Paul embraces this beauty which "was simply beyond anything—beyond speech as beyond thought—utterly incommunicable". But unlike Senlin, Paul is twelve years old and the "reasonable" modern adult reader naturally seems to recoil from accepting Paul's choice as courageous and insightful. Perhaps the modern reader recognizes the situation and resents Paul for having the courage that only old men, such as Senlin, usually have. In both cases, Aiken clearly presents a person at a critical point in a human's life—that is, at the edge of sound and silence—and both choose the onewhich encompasses the other.

Source: Jesse G. Swan, "At the Edge of Sound and Silence: Conrad Aiken's 'Senlin: A Biography' and 'Silent Snow, Secret Snow,'" in *The Southern Literary Journal,* Vol. XXII, No. 1, Fall, 1989, pp. 41-9.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Tebeaux explores Aiken'sdevelopment of the narrative and the use ofpoetical devices in "Silent Snow, Secret Snow."

" Silent Snow, Secret Snow," one of Aiken's most famous, most anthologized short stories, has received sparse critical discussion. Most likely becauseof Aiken's admitted indebtedness to Freud,the core of existing criticism attempts to define Paul's problem in terms of Freudian psychology. Recent criticism gives a general overview of Aiken's short fiction and attempts to place Paul among Aiken's other protagonists, his "lost people" who fail to accept the real world. I would like to suggest, however, that the powerful, intriguing effect of the story emanates less from the enigmatic nature of Paul's problem and more from Aiken's careful manipulation of style to develop the narrative. Aiken is less concerned with our interpreting Paul's problem than in making Paul's journey from reality into the world of snow as credible, sensual, and tangible as possible.

At best, however, Aiken's technique has received passing commentary. Aiken's effective use ofsymbol has been recognized, but no analysis has been directed to his style or its importance tothe development or the effectiveness of the narrative.Close analysis of the story reveals that Aiken carefully implements a number of poetic devices that mesh sound and sense and content to convey the stages, development, and intensity of Paul's experience.

The narrative develops about the constant juxtaposition of the real world and the snow world.These juxtapositions occur within four main settings. The narrative begins during Paul's geography class, shifts to his walk home from school, then focuses on his confrontation with his parents, and finally ends with the description of Paul's final withdrawal after he escapes to the darkness of his bed room. Paul's fate—his rejection of the living world and his acceptance of the snow—the theme of the story, develops through the contrasting descriptions of each world. Shifts within each description, accentuated by Aiken's use of poetic devices and prosody, allow us to follow vividly Paul's changing perception.

The opening paragraph defines this technique. As the narrator brings us into Paul's perception, we become aware that Paul does not understand what is happening to him. He refers to this new dimension of his perception as "it," "the thing." Aiken's choice of words to control the tone of the passage makes clear that Paul's attitude toward "the thing" is, at this point, not only positive but also secretive, defensive, and possessive:

Just why it should have happened, or why it should have happened just the way it did, he could not, of course, possibly have said; nor perhaps would it even have occurred to him to ask. The thing was above all a *secret,* something to be *preciously concealed* from Mother and Father; and to that very fact it owed an enormous part of its *deliciousness*. It was like a peculiarly *beautiful* trinket to be carried unmentioned in one's trouser pocket . . . he carried around with him everywhere a *warm* and *persistent* and increasingly *beautiful* sense of *possession.* Nor was it only a sense of *possession* —it

was also a sense of *protection.* It was as if, in some *delightful way,* his *secret* gave him a *fortress,* a wall behind which he could retreat into *heavenly seclusion.*[Italics mine]

Note that even in the opening passage "it" is used polysemically, as a grammatical expletive and as a pronominal substitution for an unknown. In the first and last sentence, the polysemic "it" suggests how entrenched "it" has already become in Paul's mind. In addition, the order of the descriptive adjectives foreshadows the development of the story: possession, protection, fortress, seclusion. "It" begins as a secret possession but leads to total seclusion.

Immediately after this description of Paul's attitude toward "it," the narrative shifts to a description of what Paul sees transpiring during his geography class. The reverie ends abruptly; and in contrast to the preceding passage, the descriptive language here is objective, neutral, extremely precise to suggest Paul's boredom and lack of involvement:

it was the half-hour for geography. Miss Buell was revolving with one finger, slowly, a huge terrestrial globe which had been placed on her desk. The green and yellow continents passed and repassed, questionswere asked and answered, and now the little girl in front of him, Deirdre, who had a funny little constellation of freckles on the back of her neck, exactly like the Big Dipper, was standing up and telling Miss Buell that the equator was the line that ran around the middle.

In addition to establishing contrasting styles, the opening passage is stylistically significant for two additional reasons: (1) it serves as a benchmark by which we can compare Paul's shifting view of reality as the narrative develops; and (2) the passage foreshadows the end of the story. The simile—"it was as if, in some delightful way, his secret gave him a fortress, a wall behind which he could retreat into heavenly seclusion"—changes from a comparativedevice here to reality for Paul. This kind of simile, which Aiken uses repeatedly, becomes, as itoccurs, an indicator of Paul's vision as it becomes increasingly snow laden.

In the following paragraphs Aiken introduces us to the story's two central symbols, the postman and the snow. The fading, muffled footsteps of the postman, who represents the real world, mark the stages of Paul's withdrawal. The snow, the idealized world toward which Paul is moving, possesses the transitory magic that covers, transforms, muffles, and harmonizes a temporal reality which Paul rejects. Also operating as a metaphor for the beckoning new world, the snow becomes the comparative intermediary between us and Paul's visionwhich Aiken wants us to grasp as vividly as possible. To embody each intrusion of the snow, Aiken develops these descriptions about poetic figures. The repetition of the "s" captures the onomatopoeic, hissing sound of the snow and suggests the transforming effect it has over Paul:

They [postman's footsteps] were softer, they had a new secrecy about them, they were muffled and indistinct; and while the rhythm of them was the same, it now said a new thing—it said peace, it said remoteness, it said cold, it said sleep.

Note again, as in paragraph one of the story, the use of the polysemic "it" to introduce the final five clauses. Use of anaphora, parallelism, and cadence add a sense of incantation and foreboding. As in paragraph one, the order of the descriptive nouns—peace, cold, remoteness, sleep—suggests the increasing distance that "it" will move from reality. In all the snow passages, the onomatopoeic effect is subtle and enters as softly as the snow:

All he now knew was, that at some point or other—perhaps the second day, perhaps the sixth—he had noticed that the presence of the snow was a little more insistent, the sound of it clearer; and conversely, the sound of the postman's footsteps more indistinct.

In other snow passages, Aiken combines the onomatopoeic effect with either rhythm or definite meter to capture the movement and momentum of falling snow. In the final clause in the passage below, predominant dactyls created by polysendeton slow the line to develop a sense of inevitable, increasingly ominous depth:

the long white ragged lines were drifting and sifting across the street, across the faces of the old houses, whispering and hushing, making little triangles of white in the corners between cobblestones, seething a little when the wind blew them over the ground to a drifted corner; and so it would be all day, getting deeper and deeper and silenter and silenter.

Abruptly, as Paul's conscience once again reverts to the classroom, the reality he perceives is described in decidedly non-rhythmic, non-emotive active voice clauses and sentences. These sentences with their pristine clarity contrast sharply with the complex sentence structure of the preceding passage with its twisting, unpredictable structure which moves as steadily, but unpredictably, as the snow:

(Miss Buell was now asking if anyone knew the difference between the North Pole and the Magnetic Pole. Deirdre was holding up her flickering brown hand, and he could see the four white dimples that marked the knuckles.)

In redirecting Paul's thoughts from the snow vision to the stark reality of the classroom, Aikenuses parenthesis five separate times in Part I. Aiken's choice of parenthesis suggests that Paul'sattitude toward reality is indeed "parenthetical": it is cut off from his main thought sequence and even now occurs only as interpolated data within the expanding, beckoning snow vision.

Therefore, throughout Part I and Part II, Aiken steadily intensifies the contrast between the snow world and the real world. The tone emerging from the descriptions of his daily, routine activities becomes increasingly less objective, less neutral, more shrill, disjointed, and irritated: "A new lamp? A new lamp. Yes, Mother, No, Mother, Yes, Mother. School is going very well. The geometry is very easy, The history is very dull." As he walks home from school, Paul's view of a living world not covered with snow is composed of black, desiccated lilac stems, dirty sparrows, a gutter, holding "a scrap of torn and dirty newspaper, caught in a little delta of filth." In contrast, the snow passages

become steadily and increasingly richer, more ardent, more intense. The addition of assonance to the "s" passages slows the pace of the lines, the repetitionof the "o" throughout the passage producing a visual euphony:

nevertheless he did in a sense cease to see, or to see theobvious external world, and substituted for this vision the vision of snow, the sound of snow, and the slow, almost soundless, approach of the postman . . . the sound of its seething was more distinct, more soothing, more persistent.

By the end of Part I, the content of the similes has clearly demarcated the advance of Paul's withdrawal: "as if it was . . . a fortress," to "as if everything in the world had been insulated by snow," to "as if he were trying to live a double life." The similes themselves, as they occur periodically, become a kind of motif of transformation by which we can trace Paul's progress toward complete withdrawal. In addition, they also indicate Paul's continuing inability to apprehend his deteriorating condition, in that he can describe his condition only by comparative statements.

By the end of Part II, Paul's shifting, intensifying, sharply contrasting attitudes toward the real world and the snow world are caught in a definite tension as Paul experiences both worlds concomitantly. At one point in Part II, Aiken uses sharp changes in diction and prosody to focus the tension as Paul wrestles with the claims of the two ontologies. The increasing abstraction of the terms used to describe the snow—words, experience, dream, fairy story, ethereal loveliness—and lengthening sentences enforce the sense of ebullition. These sentences end with an oxymoron and contrast sharply with the monosyllabic cadence, the final sentence, composed of words that are totally neutral, flat, depersonalized:

He loved it—he stood still and loved it. Its beauty was paralyzing—beyond all words, all experience, all dream. No fairy story he had ever read could be compared with it—none had ever given him this extraordinary combination of ethereal loveliness with a something else unnameable, which was just faintly and deliciously terrifying. *What was this thing?* [Italics mine]

Aiken will use oxymoron and paradox throughout Part II to sustain the conflict of fear and ecstasy that Paul feels as he finds himself steadily drawn to a vision of thickening snow. In the last passage, "it" combines "ethereal loveliness" with something "deliciously terrifying." The snow "soothingly and beautifully encroaches with its subtle gradations of menace, in which he could luxuriate." "Every minute was more beautiful than the last, more menacing."

Part III describes Paul's final alienation from the real world. He sees the doctor as a "fat fist," a "fixed false smile," grinning with "false amiability." His parents are only "slippers," "voices," and "hostile presences." His paranoia comes to a climax appropriately expressed in a series of similes that show Paul's inability to respond to human concern: "it was as if one had been stood up on a brilliantly lighted stage, under a great round blaze of spotlight; as if one were merely a trained seal, or a performing dog, or a fish, dipped out of an aquarium and held up by the tail": "nevertheless he was aware that all

three of them were watching him with an intensity—staring hard at him—as if he had done something monstrous, or was himself some kind of monster." Those of the living world most concerned about him are totally depersonified in description, while the snow becomes personified and speaks with the onomatopoeic "s" controlling the length and slow, steady rhythm of the line. Again, as in earlier snow passages, the order of descriptive words—new white, cold, sleepy, cease, peace,space—forebodes the outcome:

Ah, but just wait! Wait till we are alone together! Then I will begin to tell you something new! Something white! something cold! something sleepy! Something of cease, and peace, and the long bright curve of space!

The conclusion of Part II, which occurs after Paul's hostile, paranoid confrontation with his parents, shifts his apprehension abruptly to the room and to the activities in the house. The imagery is impersonal, Hopkinsesque in its disjoint, acute precision:

He could hear the soft irregular flutter of the flames; the cluck-click-cluck-click of the clock; far and faint, two sudden spurts of laughter from the kitchen, as quickly cut off as begun, a murmur of water in the pipes; . . .

Then, equally abruptly, in mid-sentence, Paul's thoughts shift to the impending world of snow. Aiken uses anaphora to build a 46-word clause which demarcates the beginning of Paul's irrevocable plunge into the beckoning world of snow. Each segment of the clause lengthens, becoming more heavily accented. The clauses, linked with verbals and prepositions, produce a sense of momentum that ends with two heavily stressed words and a finality of a "new sound."

and then, the silence seemed to deepen, to spread out, to become world-long and world-wide, to become timeless and shapeless, and to center inevitably and rightly, with a low and sleepy but enormous concentration of all power, on the beginning of a new sound.

While Aiken has used meter as well as major schemes and tropes in Parts I-III, the main effect of Part IV relies on prosody. Part III concludes with a sentence whose prose rhythm captures both the speed and direction conveyed by the meaning:

Without / another word / he turned / and ran up /the stairs.

Note the use of iambic feet on either side of four stressed feet to suggest Paul's rapid, decisive movement up the stairs. The iambic feet create a rhythm of forcefulness and decision. Note, in contrast, how the speed of this line has changed from the slow, deliberate pace of the preceding 46-word clause.

Part IV then begins with paradox: "The darkness was coming in long white waves," which introduces the paradoxical reversal that has taken place. Before, the snow had been the "thing," but now the real world has become the unknown, the intruder. As Paul's mother suddenly enters his room, the rhythm and sound of intrusion into his

relinquishment (sentence 1) are marked by discord and cacophony, which punctuate his loathing toward his mother:

But then a gash of horrible light fell brutally across theroom from the opening door—the snow drew back hissing—something alien had come into the room—something hostile. This thing rushed at him, clutched at him, shook him—and he was not merely horrified, he was filled with such a loathing as he had never known. What was this? This cruel disturbance? this act of anger and hate? It was as if he had to reach up a hand toward another world for any understanding of it—an effort of which he was only barely capable. But of that other world he still remembered just enough to know the exorcising words. They tore themselves from his other life suddenly—Mother! Mother! Go away! I hate you!

The description utilizes heavily stressed phrases which emphasize the negative words describing Paul's view of reality. Repetition of "something" . . . enforces the point that reality, not the snow, has become the alien thing. While the opening clause, "But then a gash of horrible light fell brutally across the room from the opening door," is perhaps the most cacophonous, jarring line in the entire story, Aiken will use metrical patterns to accentuate the meaning of lines. For example, "This thing / rushed at him / clutched at him / shook him," uses a spondee and light endings on the remaining three feet to accentuate the monosyllabic verbs. Aiken will also use heavy stresses to slow the line—"What was this?"—and anaphora combined with parallel stress pattern—"this cruel / disturbance? / this act / of anger / and hate?"—to embody the intensity of Paul's loathing. The simile—"as if he had to reach up a hand toward another world for any understanding of it"—the final one in the story, serves as the climatic element in the motif of transformation. Aiken will use molossus (to reach up) followed by the anti-bacchic (a hand toward)—five stressed feet—to suggest the momentum of reaching up.

The final sentence of the passage begins decisively with three spondees —"they tore / themselves / from his"—moves to a softer cretic pattern—" other life"—which suggests the lesser importance of reality—and ends with a molossus— 'suddenly"—which prepares us for the heavily accented crucial line—"Mother! Mother! Go away!I hate you!"—which appropriately ends with another molossus.

The reversal of worlds and values now complete, everything "was solved"; the final "exorcising words" make everything "all right." The snow advances "once more." Each clause appropriately ends with a spondee to enforce the finality of the resolution. The rhythm of the description again captures the movement of the snow: "the long / white / wavering lines / rose and fell / like enormous / sea waves."

In the closing passage of the narrative, Aiken chooses an image which maintains the paradox of Paul's story. Instead of developing by an organic process, his story has become "smaller and smaller"; it has come inward instead of opening like a flower—"it is a flower becoming a seed." By inversion Paul's problem is solved. Because the tension has been resolved, the passage lacks noticeable, stressed endings, except for two —"shut your eyes" and "do you hear?"—which accentuate the firm hold the snow now has on him. Much of the lulling quality emanates from the parallel soft endings and the

parallel trochees. The words used by the snow to describe the "story" are, like the earlier snow passages, regressive: small, smaller, inward, seed, cold seed. Each ending becomes more accented and builds to the molossus "do you hear?" which introduces the incantatory final line of the passage, the four trochees:

We'll tell you / the last, / the most / beautiful / and secret / story— / shut your eyes / it is / a very / small story—/ a story—/ that gets smaller / and smaller—/ it comes inward / instead of / opening / like a / flower— / it is / a flower / becoming a seed— / a little cold seed— / do you hear? / we are / leaning / closer / to you—.

In nearly every paragraph of the story, Aiken has plied the tools of the poet—rhythm, meter, and common figures—to congeal meaning, sound, and sense. For example, when Paul first looks out his window and expects to see snow, he sees only bright sunshine enameling the familiar street. This surprising sight is described in words that are crisply objective; the syntax is regular; the rhythm, as sharp and bumpy as the cobbled street Paul sees:

What he saw instead, was brilliant sunlight on a roof; and when, astonished, he jumped out of bed and stared down into the street, expecting to see the cobbles obliterated by the snow, he saw nothing but the bare bright cobbles themselves.

Yet, Aiken can rapidly shift his rhythm by incorporating alliteration, simile, onomatopoeia, and loose, irregularly patterned sentences composed of words with light endings to preserve the dual vision that Paul carries. In the passage below, which is typical, in part 1 of the sentence, we feel the gentle rhythm of the snow mixed with the accented actuality of the real cobbles in part 2. The repetitive "ing" words also serve as connectives among the phrases in part 1:

[A ghost of snow falling in the bright sunlight, softly and steadily floating and turning and pausing, soundlessly meeting the snow that covered, as with a transparent mirage,] [the bare bright cobbles.]

Analysis of Aiken's style thus reveals that thereis much more to "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" than defining the nature of Paul's problem. While the story can be called a case history narrative, Aiken's sustained, crafted style suggests that the narrative has more artistic aims. Even the alliterative title suggests such a purpose. Focusing only on Paul is to miss the most remarkable literary aspects of the story. Combining sense and symbol and rhythm and tone and sound, Aiken uses his poetic skills to draw the reader into Paul's world. Through the art of style, then, Aiken enables us to feel some of the magic and terrifying wonder that the snow world, whatever it is, offers Paul. Because of Aiken's skill in shaping the tools of poetry and rhetoric to fit the goal of the narrative—the vivid and sensual illumination of this particular aspect of human experience—" Silent Snow" will more than likely continue to be enjoyed long after the nature of Paul's problem has ceased to be of any psychological interest.

Source: Elizabeth Tebeaux, "'Silent Snow, Secret Snow': Style as Art," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 20, No. 2-3, Spring Summer, 1983, pp. 105-14.

Topics for Further Study

Research the fundamentals of Freud's psychological theory, especially his concepts of the Oedipal complex and the "Primal Scene." How are these concepts related to the clinical concept of madness? To what degree do they explain what happens to Paul Hasleman?

What human connections will Paul be unable to develop since he has become ill? Explore the implications of his illness.

As a poet and to a certain extent as a fiction writer, Aiken was identified with the modernist school. What aspects or elements of "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" make it modernistic? Alternatively, does anything suggest that the story does not belong to modernism but to some more traditional school of fiction writing?

Discuss the theme of alienation as it relates to"Silent Snow, Secret Snow." Is alienation inseparable from insanity, or is it possible to imagine a perfectly sane individual who is just as alienated from reality?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: The American economy is staggering from the impact of the Great Depression. The Wall Street crash of 1929 precipitated a worldwide economic crisis that resulted in devastating circumstances: record unemployment; high inflation; and financial institutions such as banks failing. Many families lose all of their savings and assets, and are forced to rely on charity. In response, the American government implements a number of social programs to relieve suffering, jump-start the economy, and get people back on their feet.

1990s: The economy is experiencing a record period of affluence and growth. Unemployment is very low, as is the inflation rate. The U.S. budget, at a record deficit in the 1980s, is at a surplus for the first time in many years.

1930s: Fascism is on the rise in Europe as financial and social instability allow leaders such as Benito Mussolini in Italy to gain power.

1990s: The same powers that embraced fascism in the 1930s now function as republics. For example, Germany has recovered from the effects of two World Wars to once again become a world power, economically and politically. Europe is united to become the European Community, with one currency and concentrated economic resources.

What Do I Read Next?

Edgar Allen Poe's "Ligeia" (1838) and "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) both deal with insanity and serve as interesting contrasts to Aiken's "Silent Snow, Secret Snow."

Ray Bradbury's story, "The Earth Men" (1948), later published in *The Martian Chronicles (1952)*, is a story about madness. It is a fascinating inversion of the usual insanity narrative and makes a useful contrast with Aiken's tale.

Chapter Two of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents (1930)* explores the roots of alienation and offers background information for a discussion of Paul Hasleman's detachment from the reality.

Arthur Rimbaud's "A Season in Hell" (1870) is a long poem that explores the alienation of a young poet.

"Senlin: A Biography" is a story by Conrad Aiken. It is often discussed in connection with "Silent Snow, Secret Snow."

Further Study

Butscher, Edward. *Conrad Aiken: Poet of White Horse Vale,* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988.

Butscher provides biographical context for Aiken's work.

Erskine, Thomas L. "The Two Worlds of 'Silent Snow, Secret Snow,'" in *From Fiction to Film: Conrad Aiken's "Silent Snow, Secret Snow,"* edited by Gerald R. Barrett and Thomas L. Erskine, Encino, Calif.: Dickenson Publishing Co., 1972, pp. 86-91.

Erskine offers his interpretation of "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," particularly the theme of discovery.

Hoffman, Frederick J. *Conrad Aiken*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962.

Hoffmann evaluates Aiken's achievement. For Hoffman, the snow is a symbol of death, an interpretation which assigns the story firmly to the realm of the tragic.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) 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, SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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

SSfS 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 Short Stories 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 SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS 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 Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories 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 SSfS 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.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories 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 SSfS, 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 Short Stories 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 SSfS, 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 Short Stories 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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