Sonnet 29 Study Guide

Sonnet 29 by William Shakespeare

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Introduction

In this sonnet by William Shakespeare first published in 1609, the speaker's extreme anguish concerning his "state" piques his audience's curiosity, which is further heightened by the repetition of this word in lines 2, 10, and 14. Is he "outcast" because of his physical, mental, or emotional condition? his fortune or social rank? his rejection from a lover, or from society? his sexual orientation? It is tempting to read Shakespeare's own life into "Sonnet 29" and consider his sometime unhappiness with his life in the theater, or his alleged bisexuality; but one must always bear in mind that the sonnets have never proven to be autobiographical. Though the cause of the speaker's pain remains a mystery, his cure is revealed: his religious devotion to another mortal, not a higher being such as God, transports him to Edenic bliss.

Author Biography

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon on or about April 23, 1564. His father was a merchant who devoted himself to public service, attaining the highest of Stratford's municipal positions—that of bailiff and justice of the peace—by 1568. Biographers have surmised that the elder Shakespeare's social standing and relative prosperity at this time would have enabled his son to attend the finest local grammar school, the King's New School, where he would have received an outstanding classical education under the direction of highly regarded masters. There is no evidence that Shakespeare attended university. In 1582, at the age of eighteen, he married Ann Hathaway of Stratford, a woman eight years his senior. Their first child, Susanna, was born six months later, followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585. These early years of Shakespeare's adult life are not well documented; some time after the birth of his twins, he joined a professional acting company and made his way to London, where his first plays, the three parts of the *Henry VI* history cycle, were presented between 1589 and 1591. The first reference to Shakespeare in the London literary world dates from 1592, when dramatist Robert Greene alluded to him as "an upstart crow." Shakespeare further established himself as a professional actor and playwright when he joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men, an acting company formed in 1594 under the patronage of Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon. The members of this company included the renowned tragedian Richard Burbage and the famous "clown" Will Kempe, who was one of the most popular actors of his time. This group began performing at the playhouse known simply as the Theatre and at the Cross Keys Inn, moving to the Swan Theatre on Bankside in 1596 when municipal authorities banned the public presentation of plays within the limits of the city of London. Three years later Shakespeare and other members of the company financed the building of the Globe Theatre, the most famous of all Elizabethan playhouses. By then the foremost London company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men also performed at court on numerous occasions, their success largely due to the fact that Shakespeare wrote for no other company.

In 1603 King James I granted the group a royal patent, and the company's name was altered to reflect the king's direct patronage. Records indicate that the King's Men remained the most favored acting company in the Jacobean era, averaging a dozen performances at court each year during the period. In addition to public performances at the Globe Theatre, the King's Men played at the private Blackfriars Theatre; many of Shakespeare's late plays were first staged at Blackfriars, where the intimate setting facilitated Shakespeare's use of increasingly sophisticated stage techniques. The playwright profited handsomely from his long career in the theater and invested in real estate, purchasing properties in both Stratford and London. As early as 1596 he had attained sufficient status to be granted a coat of arms and the accompanying right to call himself a gentleman. By 1610, with his fortune made and his reputation as the leading English dramatist unchallenged, Shakespeare appears to have retired to Stratford, though business interests brought him to London on occasion. He died on April 23, 1616, and was buried in the chancel ofTrinity Church in Stratford.

Poem Text

When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,

I all alone beweep my outcast state,

And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,

And look upon myself, and curse my fate,

Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,

Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,

Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,

With what I most enjoy contented least;

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising

Haply I think on thee: and then my state,

Like to the Lark at break of day arising

From sullen earth, sings hymns at Heaven's gate;

For thy sweet love rememb'red such wealth brings

That then I scorn to change my state with Kings.

Plot Summary

Line 1:

The opening word "when" qualifies the whole poem, and sets up "Sonnet 29" as an "if-then" statement. The speaker may not be out of luck or the public's favor at the moment, at all. However, the strong emotions exhibited in the following lines suggest that these feelings of isolation and despair are not unfamiliar to him; indeed, by line 9, he seems to gain a certain satisfaction from wallowing in his self-pity.

Line 2:

The repetition of the word "state" in lines 2, 10, and 14 indicates its significance in the poem. But its many levels of meaning prevent the reader from understanding the cause of the speaker's rejection: "state" may signify a condition, a state of mind, an estate or a person's status. However, the adjective "outcast" does possess a religious connotation (as in "outcast from Eden") that is evident again in the sonnet's last three lines.

Lines 3-4:

The speaker's skyward wails receive no reply either from nature or from God. Angered and feeling abandoned, the speaker resorts to bitter sarcasm (when he facetiously remarks that he can "trouble" heaven) and swearing ("cursed my fate").

Line 5:

The second quatrain serves as the speaker's wish list for ways in which he might alter his "state." Despite these lines, his condition remains almost as ambiguous as ever. For example, someone "rich in hope" might be a more hopeful person; alternately, it might be someone who has prospects of wealth.

Lines 6-7:

The speaker continues to name the types of people he wishes to be like but proceeds to use descriptions with obscure or multiple meanings. Not only does "featured" have several definitions ("handsome" or "formed", to name two), but it refers to three possible types: those who are "rich in hope", those "with friends possessed," and perhaps those indicated by the speaker's pointed finger as he recites the first half of line 6. The speaker's admiration of someone's "art" may refer to his knowledge, abilities, or skills as a lover; a man's "scope" may be his freedom or his range of understanding.

Line 8:

This paradox is Shakespeare's version of the cliché "the grass is always greener on the other side": whatever the speaker possesses or formerly took pleasure in is now no longer a source of pride or amusement.

Lines 9-11:

After the speaker approaches his deepest depths of self-loathing in line 9, he experiences a moment of transcendence and a remarkable change of heart. By happy chance, his thoughts turn to his beloved; his spirits soar like a lark, a bird known to fly straight up in the air as it sings its morning song. The speaker's comparison of his state to a lark's ascending flight stands out as the only figure of speech in "Sonnet 29," just as this solitary songbird is a noticeable silhouette in the morning sky□and as the speaker had been set apart from the rest of humanity. The bird's rising motion represents the dawn of a new day, a revival of spirits, and perhaps even a step up in rank; its song fills the silence of the heavens and adds joy and life to what had been a dark, depressing poem. It seems appropriate that "lark" is also a verb, meaning "to play or frolic."

Line 12:

Earth is described as "sullen" for several reasons: because of the dull color of its soil, the sluggishness of its motion, and the general melancholy of its inhabitants. The mood is very different for those who have risen above it□as the lark literally has and the speaker has figuratively. The bird singing praises to the heavens is equated with the speaker glorifying his own earthly divinity.

Lines 13-14:

The "wealth" that is brought by memories of the speaker's loved one has several possible meanings, supported by the language of the previous lines. Monetary wealth does not connect well with the idea of love, though it would help a person who had fallen out of luck with material "Fortune" (line 1). A wealth of friends, talents, or opportunities were wished for in lines 5 through 8 and are all valid interpretations. But a strong possibility also lies with the connection of wealth and religion. The speaker has been saved through his worship of a very different "King" (line 14) than Christ; perhaps his final state is so heavenly that he would rather be surrounded by memories of his beloved than in any heavenly kingdom.

The speaker's "state" has moved dramatically from that of miserable hopelessness to pure elation. Though he still stands separate from humankind, he now does so by choice.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Added to the misfortunes that the speaker of this poem faces is also the pain of knowing that he is facing his trials alone. Society tends to distance itself from sufferers; as the old adage puts it, "Laugh and the world laughs with you; cry and you cry alone." "Sonnet 29" starts by briefly identifying the source of the problem as "disgrace with Fortune" before settling in to examine the social ramifications of bad luck and the alienation that it causes. The remainder of the first stanza concerns itself with the speaker's feeling of isolation, a feeling that forces him to withdraw into himself, mostly in anger: he weeps, cries to heaven, and curses fate. The speaker is alone, or so he says, because everyone else thinks badly of him. The next stanza, though, brings up the opposite side of the equation: it is the speaker's own dark thoughts that are forcing him to distance himself from others. He is jealous, listing the things that others have that he wishes were his own. By its placement in this poem, following the first mention of his isolation, there is a strong suggestion that it is the jealousy he feels, not his bad luck alone, that is at the root of his isolation. The second stanza is presented as an explanation for the speaker's loneliness, while no such explanation is offered for his bad fortune. The list of things that he envies of others progresses from the shallow to the more serious. He first mentions jealousy toward those who have more money, which is a trait that even the very wealthy may have. In line 6 the poem becomes a bit more specific about what this writer thinks others have that he himself is lacking, specifically good looks and plenty of friends. The third line of this stanza strikes modern readers as a little puzzling or amusing, since the past four hundred years have established Shakespeare as a supreme master of his art, unsurpassed in the scope of his understanding of human nature. The second stanza ends with a line that presents the speaker's problem as being ultimately one of internal attitude, not external fate: the same things that would satisfy him at other times, he says, just don't work for him any more. Ironically, the bad mood that he has projected to the outside world, forcing his withdrawal from society, is also broken by a force outside himself: in contrast with the expanding shame that alienates the speaker from most people, one relationship is so strong in itself that it alone can overcome the speaker's intense loneliness.

Doubt and Ambiguity

"Sonnet 29," like most of Shakespeare's sonnets, was written from a very close and personal perspective in regard to the circumstances of the author's life. In many poems, the speaker is a character made up by the author to present his or her ideas (even when the character has much in common with the author), but it is generally recognized by scholars that Shakespeare wrote his sonnets about events that were occurring in his life and the world around him. In doing this, Shakespeare took on a very difficult task, one that took courage and artistic integrity: capturing his own words and ideas even when he might not have been sure what he was thinking. The mood that prevails

throughout "Sonnet 29" is one of insecurity, of feeling that, whatever life has to offer, the poet would not have the resources to deal with it. The poet describes himself as an outcast, but it is not the world that has cast him out: he has cast himself out with his shame, "myself almost despising" (line 9). Unsure about himself, about whether he is a victim of fate and other people or a small, insignificant person who deserves to be mistreated, he eventually finds his doubts erased by the thoughts of another, whom he loves. The metaphor of the lark rising from the earth, up to heaven, is such a strong and bold visual image (especially in a poem that does not use very much imagery) that readers cannot help but feel that the poet has resolved any and all doubts he may have had and come to a new position of serf-certainty. The arrival of this new attitude and the dawn of the new day both merge at the end of the poem to indicate a mood of hope and forward motion.

Wealth

The "wealth" that is mentioned in this poem's final couplet is, of course, not material wealth. The word is instead used metaphorically, to imply the sort of accumulated value that has no physical basis. The word comes at the end of a pattern of expressions used throughout this poem to refer to matters of luck and attitude, a pattern that makes use of words one usually associates with money. Fortune, in the first line, refers to good luck and positive well-being, but it can just as easily be used to indicate material wealth; likewise the use of the word "rich" in "rich in hope" (line 5) is more than just a clever turn of a phrase but also part of the overall pattern. Financial wealth is a useful metaphor in this poem because it gives a physical presence to the issues of self-worth and comparison that Shakespeare explores here. This is a poem of measurement that compares one's "scope" with that of others and balances what is most liked against what is least comforting. Fair or not, the standard that the social world often uses for comparison is material wealth.

Although it is not specific in the poem, a relationship is suggested here between wealth and social standing. In the first stanza, the speaker's problem is defined as his being an outcast, and by the poem's end he feels greater than a king□that is, above the peak of the social structure. A subtle transference takes place within the final couplet, which starts by using the "wealth" symbolism that is established throughout the poem and then, connecting the fact that kings possess money with their elevated social esteem, converts the "wealth" of line 13 into the sense of social well-being that the speaker has lacked at the beginning.

Style

The sonnet (from the Italian "sonnetto" or "little song" owes much of its long-standing popularity to the Italian poet Petrarch. By the mid-sixteenth century, this fixed poetic form was adopted by the English, who borrowed the fourteen-line pattern and many of Petrarch's literary conventions. English writers did, however, alter the rhyme scheme to allow for more variety in rhyming words: while the lines of an Italian sonnet might rhyme *abba, abba, cdc, dcd,* an English or Shakespearean sonnet rhyme pattern might be *abab, cdcd, efef, gg.*

In all but three of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets ("Sonnet 99," "Sonnet 126," and "Sonnet 145"), the first three groups of four lines each are known as quatrains, and the last two lines are recognized as a couplet. The three breaks between the quatrains and the couplet serve as convenient places where the writer's train of thought can take a different direction. In "Sonnet 29," a dramatic change in the writer's mind-set takes place in the beginning of the third quatrain, marked by the word "yet". The final couplet, which often contradicts or modifies the poem's argument, here confirms the writer's new mood as of line 10. Shakespeare's most unusual use of this poem's rhyme scheme is his repetition of "state" at the ends of lines 2 and 10. He may have wanted to draw attention to the word's many definitions, especially since he repeats it again in line 14; perhaps he was subtly connecting his "fate" (line 4) with "Heaven's gate" (line 12) through rhyme.

"Sonnet 29" is written in iambic pentameter. Iambic meter, the most familiar rhythm in the English language, is simply the succession of alternately stressed syllables; an iamb, a type of poetic foot, is a group of two syllables in which the first is unstressed and the second is stressed. The use of "penta" (meaning "five") before "meter" means that there are five iambs per line.

Stresses embody meanings; both variety and emphasis are added to lines in which the regular rhythm is broken. In this emotionally wrought poem, the often disrupted iambic meter symbolizes the speaker's own lack of composure and control. For example, the first poetic feet in lines 5, 6, and 10 are not iambic, but dactylic: "wishing me", "featured like", and "haply I" are all feet comprised of one stressed and two unstressed syllables. Other interruptions in the meter include "deaf heaven" (line 3) and "sings hymns" (line 12), which stand out not only because of their two successive stresses (known as spondees), but their assonance. "Men's eyes" (line 1), "I all" (line 2), "sweet love" (line 13), and "such wealth brings" (line 13), all break the sonnet's regular meter with two or more consecutive accented syllables; the writer thus calls attention to his sense of isolation and his regard for the poem's recipient.

Historical Context

The Reign of Elizabeth

This poem was written during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I of England. It was an exciting time of growth and prosperity for the country. Elizabeth was the daughter of King Henry VIII (1491-1547) and his second wife, Anne Boleyn. Henry had six wives over the course of his lifetime, forcing him to separate England from the Roman Catholic church in order to follow his desire to divorce freely. After Henry's death in 1547, he was followed by Elizabeth's half-brother Edward, who was then only ten years old. Edward was king briefly until he died of tuberculosis in 1553. Because of a bill that one of his dukes, John Dudley, had him sign when he was dying, succession to the crown fell to Lady Jane Gray, who was Dudley's daughter-in-law. She reigned for four days until Mary I, another of Henry's children, was able to restore control of the crown to the Tudor dynasty. Elizabeth supported Mary, who was her half-sister, but Mary did not trust her because Elizabeth was a Protestant (Mary was a devout Catholic). Mary had Elizabeth locked up in the Tower ofLondon in 1554. Elizabeth became queen in 1558 when Mary I died. There were plots against Elizabeth, but none were powerful enough to remove her from the crown. The Catholics wanted her cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots, to be queen, so she had Mary imprisoned; when she had Mary executed in 1587, Spain, which was a predominantly Catholic country, attacked England, hoping to defeat Protestantism and to take control from Elizabeth. Unexpectedly, with some luck and well-planned maneuvers, the British navy was able to defeat the Spanish Armada, and so Britain began to rise to the status of a world power. After years of struggle for the crown of England, the court settled down with one monarch who went on to rule for 45 years. Shakespeare, who was born in 1564, had spent his whole life under the reign of Queen Elizabeth at the time that his sonnets were written.

The Plague

During Elizabeth's reign England experienced a population explosion. By 1558 the population was four times what it had been a hundred and fifty years earlier. Between Shakespeare's birth in 1564 and his death in 1616, the number of people in Britain grew by another fifty percent. One reason was England's ascension to world power status, bringing immigrants from other countries. Another reason was the relative stability brought by Elizabeth's reign after hundreds of years of fighting between Catholics and Protestants for control of the country. One result of this huge sudden growth was overcrowding in the cities, especially London. The crowded conditions created poor sanitary conditions that provided a breeding ground for disease. Between 1538 and 1640, numerous epidemics swept across the country, especially the highly communicable bubonic plague. One key factor was the inability to keep the afflicted isolated from the healthy population under such conditions. Another contributing factor was the fact that rodents and the fleas that infest them are both capable of carrying the bubonic plague bacterium *Yersinia pestis.* Rats and mice thrive in crowded areas,

where food and waste are not properly disposed of, and it was poor areas that were generally the most crowded. More poor areas were created by the rampant inflation that resulted from the population boom, opening up conditions for even quicker spread of the disease. In 1592 and 1593, the health authorities of London ordered the theaters to remain closed in an effort to slow the spread of the plague at public gatherings. It is believed that Shakespeare, whose career as an actor and dramatist was stalled by the theater closings, wrote his sonnets during this time of unemployment.

Critical Overview

Human love can be transcendent, and may even afford one a glimpse of "Heaven's gate": these themes have often been the focus of the discussions of "Sonnet 29," one of the sonnets in Shakespeare's sequence addressed to a young man. "Sonnet 29" says that God disappoints and the young man redeems, notes Paul Ramsey in *The Fickle Glass: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets.* He goes on to discuss the idea of love as an alternate religion, and the unearthly rewards of worshipping another mortal. David Weiser also reads "Sonnet 29" as a proclamation of love's saving grace, but with a twist: devotion to another can rescue someone from a preoccupation with oneself. "Irony pervades this sonnet, deriving from its basic contrast between love and serf-love," he continues in his book *Mind in Character: Shakespeare's Speakers in the Sonnets.*

Figures of speech are often central to Shakespeare's sonnets, making "Sonnet 29" unusual in its support of a single metaphor. But the simile of the lark that appears in line 12 has been recognized as especially effective and powerful because of its dramatic isolation. In his article for the *Durham University Journal,* David Thatcher engages in an in-depth discussion of the lark's importance to the speaker, as well as to the poem.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

David Kelly teaches courses in poetry and drama at College of Lake County and Oakton Community College, in Illinois. In the following essay, Kelly examines Shakespeare's "Sonnet 29" in terms of the dramatic techniques that it uses.

It seems that a sonnet, by itself, is a paltry thing, hardly worth the attention of serious critics. Those who have read the current criticism on Shakespeare know that little is written about any one poem alone, that the group of them are often addressed together. There are good reasons for this. Shakespeare appears to have written them all in a close period of time (unlike the lifetime output of a more active poet), so that they can be studied as a group. Also, they are much more personal than sonnets of the sixteenth century, offering critics a clearer view of how writers thought of life's relation to poetry at that time. Finally, they are the work of the greatest playwright who ever lived, and so critics use the sonnets as a tool to dig for information on the dramatist more often than they appreciate the sonnets for themselves.

Rather than face the difficulty in addressing oneself to a single sonnet by Shakespeare, many literary critics open up their field of inquiry to that broader unit we know as "the sonnet sequence"□ looking for patterns. In the case of the Shakespearean sonnets, we know only that there is a finite quantity, 154. After that, the best form that they make when put together is open to debate. Some are addressed to a younger friend or patron; some to the Dark Lady who is referred to as the mistress of the poems' speaker; some focus their attention on a rival poet. The identities of these people, their actual relationships to Shakespeare, and just what these relationships tell us about poetic inspiration are debated endlessly.

Looking at "Sonnet 29," which begins "When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes," a reader's first response might be, "What was Shakespeare feeling so depressed about?" The question assumes, though, that he actually was feeling depressed and humiliated at the time of writing, even though that is specifically contrary to what the poem says. The first word, "when" is the qualifier, telling us that the emotions discussed in the following sixteen lines were not necessarily happening at the time of writing, but that they are emotions that came up every now and again. What Shakespeare is telling us is that he does know these feelings. The only thing we know regarding *when* he feels like this is that he experienced this hopelessness at some time during his relationship with the "thee" who is first mentioned in line 10. Historians place this sonnet within the series addressed to Shakespeare's younger friend and patron, and that understanding could open the door to a good deal of intellectual labor about social relations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But this sonnet seems to stand quite well without any knowledge of who Shakespeare meant by "thee." "Thee" could be one's girlfriend or boyfriend, spouse, or trusted confidant. For now, one can leave aside the question of what incidents Shakespeare was talking about and appreciate the poem on its own terms.

The players in Shakespeare's small drama of "Sonnet 29" are long gone, but we still have the drama itself. A judgment that is pretty universally accepted is that Shakespeare was a better playwright than a poet. Saying it this way makes it sound as if there was something wrong with his poetry, but the actual sum and substance is that he was such an astounding dramatist that there would be little he, or anyone, could do that would meet the level of skill in his plays. It seems plausible to suggest that it is Shakespeare's dramatic talent, not necessarily his poetic talent, that must shine through from the center of everything he did. "Sonnet 29," at first look, does not seem to be any more dramatic than it is autobiographical, but even in the tightly controlled sonnet form, Shakespeare's dramatic talent shows itself clearly.

One of the most important elements in creating the "soul" of a drama is dramatic tension. The most telling way to show that this poem is a drama at heart is to examine the tension of its central question. In recent times, the word "tension" is most often used to indicate having too much to do at once, and being exhausted and beleaguered by the constant demands that pull at you. We think of being tense as a nervous condition that shows itself, often, through anger. This is one meaning, but one that has drifted away from the word's core. "Tension" essentially means that something or someone is being pulled in opposite directions with fairly equal force (if one side pulled with much greater strength, the tension wouldn't last long).

In drama, tension is used to keep the audience engaged in the story that is unfolding. The audience keeps up with what is being presented, wondering which side will eventually pull with greater force: good or evil? hope or despair? jealousy or faith? A tense dramatic situation could entail someone trying to snip the right wire to disable a bomb with a few seconds left, but often the powers pulling against each other are more subtle than that. In "Sonnet 29," the dramatic tension lies between the speaker of the poem and his society; between self-worth and low-esteem; between the present and the world that one can access through memory. This all adds up to a dispute between humanity and Fortune. Fortune may be luck, it may be earned by talent, it may be the will of God (as indicated by deaf heaven ignoring the speaker's plight), but whatever it is, it is telling this person that he is not worth much. The force pulling away from Fortune throughout the sonnet is implied rather than stated□that the poem's speaker is trying to believe in the value of his own life.

The drama builds throughout the poem. The first stanza shows the speaker's serf-worth under attack. The second has him floundering around, trying to regain his self-esteem with wishes and anger, doing whatever it takes to consider himself a worthy human. The poem reaches a climax with the ninth line, with the speaker *almost* despising himself□this is the high point of the poem's tension, where the forces pulling in opposite directions have stretched him as far as they can. Something has to give. In the tenth line, there is relief: the thought of that special other person comes flooding into the speaker's mind. The struggle between two conflicting ideas had been closely balanced up to this point, but once he has added the influx of self-worth that comes from this "sweet love remembered," the competition is not even close.

If "Sonnet 29" is a drama, then who are the characters involved? This is where the biographical approach to the entire sonnet sequence would make the most sense, as literary analysts try to piece together the personalities of the speaker and "thee." Theories abound about the financial difficulties that Shakespeare faced, about the Dark Lady who was his mistress, about who his patron was. As Rosalie L. Colie explained it in an essay called "Criticism and Analysis of Craft: The Sonnets," critics tend to read the entire sonnet sequence as one continuing drama. Reading the sonnet as part of the sonnet sequence may yield a richer interpretation than can be derived from a single poem, but it is likely to raise discrepancies that confuse issues further. For instance, most readers of "Sonnet 29" assume that its speaker is addressing the object of his romantic affection. Most critics, on the other hand, identify the subject of the poem as a man younger than Shakespeare with whom the poet had a financial relationship and a close friendship, but no romance. Which view is correct? Perhaps it is sufficient to know, just as the sonnet says, that the memory of this love (whatever the personal relationship) has the power to affect the outcome of the speaker's inner turmoil.

Finally, one should be able to find a dramatic situation, if this poem actually is a drama. Dramas have scenes: they involve characters in a place where they can voice their emotions. It is not enough to have an inner life. That inner life must be put in a place where it can be played out for the entire audience to understand and appreciate. This is where the sonnet form does the least service to Shakespeare's talent as a dramatist. In "Sonnet 29," one person is talking and the other is silent. Readers are not given a setting□there is no particular place where we could best imagine this person speaking his mind. In modern theater, innovative companies mount productions that are unspecific about where they take place, giving only a vacant stage representing some unreal terrain. Silent characters also are not that uncommon, but, on stage, there is interaction between the characters. But in this sonnet that interaction can be claimed only with a great deal of imagination. Perhaps one could say that the act of remembering is a form of interaction between the poem's speaker and "thee," but actually the memory is self-contained: the other person could be long gone from this world, and the speaker could still conjure him or her up in memory. One character goes through changes before our eyes, but the dramatic qualities of this sonnet collapse when we start to look for interaction between two characters.

William Shakespeare is often recognized as the greatest dramatist who ever lived. This talent for drama can be seen in the dramatic qualities of the sonnet: its dramatic tension and the characters of Shakespeare and of his former love. However, the drama of the sonnet falters in regard to dramatic situation and interaction between characters because one character appears only in the memory of the other.

Source: David Kelly, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Bruce Meyer is the director of the creative writing program at the University ofToronto. He has taught at several Canadian universities and is the author of three collections of poetry. In the following essay, Meyer interprets "Sonnet 29" as a rhetorical demonstration of "how one reasons one's way around circumstance "

In the narrative of Shakespeare's sonnets, "Sonnet 29" falls among the phase (sonnets 1-129) where the voice of the older poet, the voice of experience and good counsel, fights off challenges for a young man's affections from another poet and from a dark lady. In this schema, "Sonnet 29" falls at a low, melancholy point in the apparent narrative. It is a complaint, in the true Renaissance style, where the persona dwells on a sense of loss□in this context, the possible loss of favor in the eyes of the young man. The poem begins with the famous line, "When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes," as if the voice is reconnoitering his situation and finding that his stock is at an all-time low. What seems to pervade "Sonnet 29" is, however, a comic structure, a fall from and a return to favor and hope, and a sense of how one recovers from a type of "fall" from grace.

The word "Fortune," capitalized in the first line of the poem is set in the line as a personification. This "Fortune" is the classical "fortuna"□the idea of a force in the universe that controls the destiny of an individual. In classical literature, particularly Boethius's *A Consolation of Philosophy,* 'Fortune' is the antagonist who acts against reason and 'Philosophy.' Fortune, in the Sophoclean sense, is the predetermined pattern of an individual's life that cannot be avoided□it is the destiny of an individual, the narrative of a life, that must inevitably come to pass. In the Renaissance sense of the word as explained by Niccolo Machiavelli, fortune is the raw material of ability and circumstance that life presents to an individual. Machiavelli suggests, in his treatise on the nature of political leadership, *The Prince,* that an individual can overcome the negative powers of fortune or destiny by exercising what he calls "virtu" or the power of intelligence over circumstance. Shakespeare's "Sonnet 29" is a poem about how one reasons one's way around circumstance. The poem is not only a matter of counting one's blessings but of finding them. Like Boethius in the opening of A *Consolation of Philosophy,* the persona of "Sonnet 29" is woeful and announces that when he is "in disgrace" "I all alone beweep my outcast state." His plaintive cries fall on "deaf Heaven." God, as the poem suggests, does not tolerate complaints. The persona's cries are "bootless," or useless. The word "bootless," however, also suggests that the persona is thinking out loud without really having a firm foundation for his musings□a no-no in the world of Renaissance thought, where the Virgilian precept of approaching life with strong, emotionally detached, and objective reasoning was still the order of the day. Like Boethius in .4 *Consolation of Philosophy,* the persona of this poem must find his way to solace through the power of thought and through the banishment of emotions where he might feel sorry for himself. In the Renaissance perspective, feeling sorry for oneself and reason are incompatible. Suffice to say, cursing one's "fate" and "Wishing me like to one more rich in hope" or envying "this man's art, and that man's scope" may serve the

need to air one's complaints but can do little to see one toward the kind of resolution that a sonnet must afford: the solution to the problem at hand.

Shakespeare's use of the sonnet form, especially in "Sonnet 29," allows him to air a complaint in poetry (in Boethius, Dame Philosophy sends the Muses packing in the first several pages because, as she reasons, poetry does nothing but lock one into one's problems) while at the same time reasoning the poet to demonstrate the possibilities and the complexities in the process of reason. The sonnet, unlike the lyric, cannot stand still either emotionally or rhetorically. It presents a problem in the opening octave and then determines to answer it in the sestet by what is often a one-hundred-and-eighty degree turn of reasoning between lines 8 and 9. This turn of reasoning, the volta, especially in "Sonnet 29," shifts the poem from being simply a litany of woes and self-indulgent "bemoaning" and into an examination of the cause and effect relationship behind the poem, to the point where the sonnet can almost be considered an early form of psychotherapy. The voice asks, "what is wrong" and then probes for the answer.

For the persona of "Sonnet 29," all is not lost. He realizes that even in his deepest moment of self-loathing, "in these thoughts myself almost despising," there is a glimmer of hope. The shift from woe to consolation demands that every issue under consideration be examined from the opposite perspective□a trait that Boethius spells out quite clearly. The emotions rarely allow one the privilege of seeing the other side of an argument; yet the persona of "Sonnet 29" rises out of his emotional distress in line 9, a tall order in that the volta demands considerable strength of intellect and a kind of hopeful dispassion that sees light in darkness and possibility in despair.

He announces in line 10, "Haply I think on thee," which suggests that the persona's lot is not as bad as he had thought because he has the young man's friendship. This is more than just a matter of considering the opposite idea as a matter of "thinking" one's way through the argumentative process of the sonnet: it is a miracle of images. "Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate," the poet likens his friendship with the young man. The Platonic idea of friendship, what Jonathan Swift perceives as the great virtue in the Houyhnmms in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels,* is, perhaps the highest possible ideal one can seek to attain. Friendship, in the classical sense, is something that is more continuous than love. It survives the momentary passage of passions, it advises and counsels, and it stands the test of time. It is more than power and more than wealth. Friendship, for the persona of "Sonnet 29," is "wealth" that is counted only in the spirit, and the memory of it brings him to the recognition that it is worth more than any amount of momentary recompense. "I scorn to change my state with kings," he notes. What should be remembered is that in the center of Dante's Hell are those who betrayed friendship, Brutus and Judas.

What "Sonnet 29" proves is not only the value of friendship but the undeniable worth of reason. The form itself, the sonnet, is a rhetorical rather than a lyrical structure, and although it offers lyric elements such as the rhyming couplet at the conclusion or the balanced meter, its chief value is as an argumentative structure, a means of working one's way toward reason in any situation. The Renaissance mind pursued balance and proportion in all things, and the sonnet is a balanced way of looking not only at

emotional problems but through them. In this process of pursuing balance, the tools are not only reason but imagination and memory.

The image of the lark ascending at daybreak to sing "hymns at heaven's gate," is not merely a flight of fancy but the realization that memory and the imagination are the repositories of hope, wherein the true value of the more lasting aspects of one's existence□friendship, truth, faith□are there to shore up one's defenses against a world bound up in entropy and emotional tides, if only one is able to reason his or her way to it.

Source: Bruce Meyer, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Alice Van Wart teaches literature and writing in the Department of Continuing Education at the University ofToronto. She has published two books of poetry and has written articles on modern and contemporary literature. In the following essay, Van Wart discusses the content of the poem in relation to its structure.

One of the most popular of the fixed poetic forms in English literature is the sonnet. Attributed to the Italian poet Petrarch in the fourteenth century, the sonnet is still used by many contemporary writers. The appeal of the sonnet lies in its two-part structure, which easily lends itself to the dynamics of much human emotional experience and to the intellectual mode of human sensibility for argument based on complication and resolution.

In the last decade of the sixteenth century, sonnet writing became highly fashionable following the publication of Sir Philip Sydney's sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella,* published in 1591. Sonnet sequences were widely read and admired at this time, circulated about the court, and read among friends and writers. Shakespeare took up this trend, adapting his considerable talent to the prevailing literary mode while writing for the theater. He specifically followed the form of the sonnet as adopted from the Italian into English by the Earl of Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt.

Bound by the conventions of the sonnet, Shakespeare used the form to explore the same themes as early Latin, Italian, and French verse. He treated the themes of the transient nature of youth and physical beauty, the fallibility of love, and the nature of friendship. Even the dominating conceit of Shakespeare's sequence□the poet's claim that his poems will confer immortality on his subject□is one that goes back to Ovid and Petrarch. In Shakespeare's hands, however, the full potentiality of the sonnet form emerged, earning for it the poet's name.

The Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet are similar in that they both present and then solve a problem. The Petrarchan sonnet does it through an octave which presents a problem and a sestet which provides the resolution. A different rhyme scheme and thus a different convention of logical and rhetorical organization determines the differences between the two sonnet forms. In the Petrarchian sonnet the problem is solved by reasoned perception or a meditative process. The Shakespearean sonnet maintains the basic two-part structure of conflict and resolution, now presented in fourteen lines of three quatrains and a concluding rhyming couplet. Each quatrain presents a further aspect of a problem, conflict, or idea. The resolution occurs in the last two of a rhyming couplet, achieved through logical cleverness that summarizes or ties together what has been expressed in the three quatrains. The rhyme scheme, subject to variation, is *abab, cdcd, efef, gg* in iambic pentameter.

The sonnet sequence is a gathering together of a number of sonnets to present a narrative or examine a larger theme. Shakespeare's sequence, like Sydney's, was intended as a series of love poems to celebrate the poet's affections for a young male

friend. The poems were collected and published as a sequence in 1609, though initially they were private poems meant for a small circle of writers and friends, not for publication.

There are 154 sonnets in the sequence. Some scholars speculate these are ones that remain from a longer work, thus accounting for the sonnet's problems in chronology, thematic development, and connections between individual poems. Other scholars speculate that not all the poems in the sequence were written by Shakespeare himself, thus accounting for the uneven nature of the sequence. In fact, many puzzles surrounding the sequence still exist. Particularly intriguing is the ongoing attempt to identify the young man with the initials W. H., to whom the sequence is addressed and dedicated, along with the mysterious so-called dark woman who intrudes into the relationship between the younger man and the poet.

The story that unfolds within the sequence is that of a love triangle. It begins with the relationship between the speaker of the poems and a young man he admires and comes to love. Their relationship, however, is impeded by their differences in age, wealth, and rank. The poet is older and more established than his friend, while the young man is from an influential and wealthy family. The relationship is also threatened by the shadow of a dark and sensual woman, referred to by critics as "the dark lady" and presumed to be the poet's mistress.

Whoever the young man was, his image dominates the sequence, and whoever the mysterious woman may have been, we can see from the details in the sequence that she created a conflict for the poet between his profound affection for his friend and the sexual attraction that drew him to this woman. In the later sonnets of the sequence, the poet is thrown into misery and anguish when this woman betrays him by seducing the young man.

Aside from these few details about the circumstances of the complicated triangle within the poems, the sequence tells us little about the personal life of the poet. What it does show, however, is something of the nature of the man behind the words, a man who occasionally seems to be on the edge of emotional and physical exhaustion, even disillusionment, a man who is not always happy with his craft or the theater, and a man who sometimes distrusts the very gift he believes will confer immortality on his subject. Yet it also shows a man who perseveres because he remains engaged in the world and fascinated by the people and events around him, an involvement that enables him to rise above any personal setback and pain.

The sonnets in the sequence up to "Sonnet 127" (when the dark lady makes her appearance) celebrate the poet's love and affection for the young man. "Sonnet 29" specifically shows the importance of this friendship to the older man during a particularly low point in the poet's life. The poet is at odds with himself and the world around him, almost on the point of despair, and disliking himself for his serf-pity. In the first quatrain the poet expresses his sense of personal failure. In the second he adds to this sense of failure by comparing himself to the young man he loves and the young man's friends. Beside their accomplishments his own bring him little contentment. In the third quatrain

the thought of his friend reminds him of his friend and the love the young man gives to the poet's life. Immediately the nature of his thoughts changes and his spirits rise. In the final couplet, the poet concludes his reflection by acknowledging that the very existence of the young man's love makes all other accomplishments unimportant and his life far richer than any others□so rich, in fact, he would not change it for any other.

A surface paraphrase of the poem ignores the complexity of the intellectual process within the poem, particularly the quick turns of thought expressed in the poem's progression of logic and in the meaning of its diction. Each of the poem's quatrains advances the poet's complaint. In the first line of the first quatrain the poet expresses his sense of failure as "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes." He feels he has failed in the eyes of others and therefore believes himself to be an outcast. The word "fortune" suggests both material wealth and the events or circumstances of the poet's life. He curses his "outcast state": "And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, and look upon myself, and curse my fate." Fate in this sense is the situation into which the circumstances of his life have placed him.

In the second quatrain he further adds to his sense of failure by comparing himself to others "more rich in hope." Hope suggests a more optimistic nature and possibility in the future, both of which the poet feels he lacks. He wishes he were "featured like him," or as handsome as some others, and also like others "with friends possessed." "Him" is possibly the young man himself who is surrounded by friends. The poet further wishes he had what some others have by "desiring this man's art and that man's scope." "Art" suggests both specific talent and objects of art such as paintings and fine artifacts, while "scope" points to opportunity and intelligence or the extent or range of one's understanding. In the final line he compares what others have to what he "most enjoys," which presumably is his talent with words but with which, paradoxically, he says he is "contented least." Though the poet writes because he wants to, it does not bring him the kind of satisfaction he believes the other qualities bring others.

In the final quatrain the poet acknowledges the self-pitying nature of his complaints and admits to disliking himself for them with his admission "in these thoughts myself almost despising." Fortunately, by recalling the presence of the young man in his life ("Haply I think on thee), the very nature of his thoughts changes. The poet expresses his turn of thought in the sweeping image of "the lark" who at break of day arises from "sullen earth" to sing hymns "at heaven's gate." Though the poet does not define the love between the young man and himself as spiritual, the very thought of his friend's love elevates the poet's "state," a state he compares to the lark. With the thought of his friend, the poet's spirits soar beyond his gloomy thoughts.

The shift in the poem from the conflict presented in the first two quatrains begins in the third quatrain, pivoting in the first line of the third quatrain with the conjunctive adverb "yet." Although the poet has almost given in to despising himself, the thought of the young man turns his thoughts in another direction and brings the poem to its final shift□the resolution of the concluding couplet: "For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings / That then I scorn to change my state with kings."

The resolution turns on the first word of the couplet "for" and exploits the double meaning of "wealth" and "state." In the first line of the sonnet the poet finds himself "in disgrace with fortune." Here "fortune" is associated with the material wealth and success of the material world, a "state" the poet has not achieved and because of which he believes himself to be a failure and an outcast. Yet the recollection of the young man's love reminds the poet of a different kind of richness, a wealth that has nothing to do with what a person owns, or how a person looks, or the way a person thinks, but with the special qualities of their relationship. Because of the poet's recollection of "thy sweet love," he now "scorns" to change his state with the "state of kings."

"State" is both a condition in the outer world and an inner state. The young man's love gives the poet something far more meaningful than anything in the material world. Like the image of the lark rising above "sullen earth" to sing at "heaven's gate," the poet now makes his own wealth known to the world in his poem. The poem will immortalize this love by lasting long after anything in the mutable material world. With this knowledge the poet is able to resolve his previous complaints, and he now scorns "to change my state with kings." In the logical progression of the poet's thoughts, the poet realizes he is far wealthier than any king.

The expression of the poet's affection for the younger man perfectly fulfills the logical and rhetorical structure. It presents its conflict in the twelve lines of the three qutrains and resolves it in the rhyming couplet. The enduring value of this sonnet rests, however, not so much in the argument it presents, which is merely a play in logic, but in the integrity of the rhetorical strategy and its perfect fusion of content and form.

Source: Alice Van Wart, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Adaptations

William Shakespeare: A Poet for All Time. Videocassette. The Master Poets Collection, Volume 2. Malibu, CA: Monterey Home Video. 1998.

William Shakespeare, his Life and Times. Videocassette. Salt Lake City, UT: Bonneville Worldwide Entertainment. 1998.

William Shakespeare, Poet and Dramatist, 1564-1616. Videocassette. West Long Branch, NJ: White Star. 1993.

The Complete Sonnets of William Shakespeare, Cassette 1: Sonnets 1-78. Audiocassette. Camp Hill, PA: Book-of-the-Month Records. 1982.

Martin, Philip. *Shakespeare, The Sonnets.* Audiocassette. Sydney: ABC Radio. 1980.

The Complete Sonnets of William Shakespeare, with "A Lover's Complaint" and Selected Songs. Two audiocassettes. West Hollywood, CA: Cove Audio. 1996.

Vendler, Helen. *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Helen Vendler Reads.* Audio disc. Cambridge, MA: Bellknap Press ofHarvard University Press. 1997.

Topics for Further Study

Imagine yourself being an outcast, at a social low, rejected. Write a poem explaining what it would be like.

Read Shakespeare's *Othello* and compare the character of Othello to the speaker of this poem. Write Othello's response to this speaker, defending his own jealousy and anger.

Is this poem's speaker living in the past? Do you think this person should be more concerned with the world around him or her?

A few years after he wrote this poem, Shakespeare achieved tremendous artistic and financial success. Find out about some other famous person who has been close to despair before their fame, and report on the person who helped them persevere.

Compare and Contrast

1609: England is on the rise to its eventual position as the dominant world power, having been considered a third-rate backwater as recently as 1558, when Elizabeth I ascended to the throne.

Today: Having suffered great physical and financial losses during the two World Wars in the twentieth century, England is still an important member of the European community but is not considered one of the superpowers that influence world affairs.

1609: The first newspapers with regular press schedules appear in Lower Saxony and Strasbourg.

Today: With the advent of electric media, especially the internet, many doubt that print newspapers will survive for long into the twenty-first century.

1609: Jamestown, the first permanent European settlement in what is now America, is nearly destroyed, having been founded two years earlier by English gentlemen who were unprepared for breaking new soil. During the "Starving Time" of 1609-1610, residents were driven by hunger to cannibalism, raiding graves and victimizing one another.

Today: Many Americans' understanding of colonial times is limited to the romanticized story of eleven-year-old Powhatan princess Pocahontas saving the life of Captain John Smith.

1609: The most populous nation in Europe is France, with 16 million inhabitants. England has only 4.5 to 5 million. China has a population of roughly 120 million.

Today: The latest population figures show France having 54.3 million people, just over three times what it is in 1609. China and England, though, have increased 900 percent since Shakespeare's time: England's population is 46 million, and China has a population of 1.2 billion.

What Do I Read Next?

A. L. Rowse, one of the great critics of English literature of recent times, scrutinized each of the 154 sonnets for *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problems Solved,* published in 1973 by Harper & Rowe. Each sonnet is presented with limited notes, giving readers enough to see the story behind the poems without becoming bogged down with theory.

A. L. Rowse is also the author of one of the most thoroughly-researched and readable biographies of the poet, *Shakespeare the Man.* The second edition was published in 1988 by St. Martin's Press.

One of the most interesting projects related to Shakespeare's sonnets in recent years is *Love's Fire: Seven New Plays Inspired by Seven Shakespearean Sonnets,* published in 1998 by William Morrow & Co. Playwrights who have works in this collection include Eric Bogosian, Wendy Wasserstein, and Ntozake Shange.

English playwright and poet Ben Jonson was the closest thing to a peer that Shakespeare had. The two knew each other as friends, and early in his career Shakespeare appeared as an actor in one of Jonson's plays. Readers can look at another great talent of Shakespeare's time by reading *The Complete Poems of Ben Jonson,* published in 1988 by Penguin Classics.

There are two basic types of sonnets. The English sonnet is often called the Shakespearean sonnet after its most skilled practitioner. Similarly, the Italian sonnet is also regularly referred to as the Petrarchan sonnet after Petrarch, the fourteenth-century Italian poet who perfected the form. His sonnets can be found in *Petrarch: The Canzoniere, or Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta,* translated by Mark Musa and introduced by Barbara Manfredi and published by the Indiana University Press in 1999.

Oscar Wilde was a brilliant playwright *(The Importance of Being Earnest)* and novelist *(The Picture of Dorian Gray).* In 1899 he set his attention to discerning the truth of the identity of the person mentioned on the dedication page of the first publication of Shakespeare's sonnets, which resulted in the essay "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." That essay, reading like a mystery novel, is an impressive piece of work, and it contains ample scholarly details about Shakespeare's life, although modern scholars point out that the dedication to "Mr. W. H." was probably from the book's publisher, Thomas Thorpe; the dedication page is even signed "T. T." Whether it is accurate or not does not diminish the fun of reading Wilde's nearly-100-page essay and following his search for the ancient mystery.

Several critics have speculated that the rival who is sometimes referred to in Shakespeare's sonnets was Christopher Marlowe, the English poet and playwright who died in 1593, as the sonnets were being written. The work of Marlowe's most often read today is his play *Dr. Faustus,* which was published after his death. His long poem "Hero and Leander" is thought to be a response to Shakespeare's own "Venus and Adonis."

Further Study

Booth, Stephen, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets,* New Haven, CT:Yale University Press, 1969.

Booth's academic study of the structure of the sonnets considers minute details that most readers disregard, such as chapters on "Rhetorical Patterns," "Phonetic Structure," etc. This is a difficult but useful work.

Greene, Thomas M., "Pitiful Thrivers: Failed Husbandry in Shakespeare's Sonnets," *mModern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare's Sonnets,* edited by Harold Bloom, New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987, pp. 75-92.

Greene examines a sense of inadequacy that shows throughout Shakespeare's poetry.

Ramsey, Paul, *The Fickle Glass: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets,* New York: AMS Press, 1979.

Ramsey's scholarly work is careful and thoughtful, but it might be a little complex for some readers.

Shakespeare, William, *The Riddle of Shakespeare's Sonnets,* New York: Basic Book Publishers, 1962.

Six notable critics□Northrop Frye, Edward Hubler, Leslie Fiedler, Stephen Spender, R. P. Blackmur, and Oscar Wilde□look for clues about Shakespeare's life and personality in his sonnets, coming to a surprisingly wide range of conclusions.

Smith, D. Nichol, ed., *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare,* London: University ofOxford Press, 1963. The essays in this book were written roughly one hundred to one hundred and fifty years after the poet's death. It is interesting to note how seldom critics of the 1700s, including Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson, paid attention to Shakespeare's poetry, concentrating instead on his dramas.

Wait, R. J. C, *The Background to Shakespeare's Sonnets,* New York: Schocken Books, 1972.

This source offers a good, intelligible mix of historical information and biographical information about Shakespeare.

Weiser, David K., *Mind in Character: Shakespeare's Speaker in the Sonnets,* Columbia, MO: University ofMissouri Press, 1987.

While many analyses identify the speaker of the sonnets with the author himself, Weiser's book meticulously dissects what we know from the poems and establishes a separate character used in the poems.

Wilson, Katharine M., "Shakespeare's Sonnets Imitate and Satirize Earlier Sonnets," in *Readings on the Sonnets,* San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1997, pp. 148-158. The examination of "Sonnet 29" here begins, "That this is parody we could not doubt." Wilson gives a spirited and intelligent argument with examples for her approach to Shakespeare's work.

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1985.

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Harold Bloom, Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987, pp. 47-74.

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Fussell, Paul, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form,* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979.

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Thatcher, David, "What a Lark: The Undoing of Sonnet 29."*Durham University Journal,* January, 1994, pp. 59-66.

Weiser, David K, *Mind in Character: Shakespeare's Speaker in the Sonnets,* University of Missouri Press, 1987, pp. 33-40.

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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:

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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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