There Will Come Soft Rains Study Guide

There Will Come Soft Rains by Sara Teasdale

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

In 1950, noted science fiction writer Ray Bradbury published his popular collection of futuristic short stories called *The Martian Chronicles*. That book contains a story called "There Will Come Soft Rains," and it is not by accident that the title is the same as Sara Teasdale's poem published in *Flame and Shadow* thirty years earlier, in 1920, by MacMillan. Bradbury borrowed the name directly from the poet's work and based his story on a theme similar to the poem's, the senseless destruction of humankind by their own hands through war. In the story, a talking house is left confused and devastated by the loss of its masters, who vanished in an atomic blast. At one point, the house, lonely for its mistress, reads aloud one of the dead woman's favorite poems□"There Will Come Soft Rains" by Sara Teasdale.

Teasdale's poem is a response to her disdain for and disillusionment over World War I. When the United States became involved in the conflict, Teasdale turned some of her creative attention to writing anti-war lyrics, and when this poem appeared in *Flame and Shadow*, it carried the subtitle "War Time." The poem addresses the atrocity of battle from the perspective of nature□of birds and frogs and trees whose lives will go on even if human beings obliterate themselves from the planet. It is interesting to note that in Bradbury's short story based on the poem, nature and nonhuman objects do not fare quite as well, eventually succumbing to their own deaths without people around to support them. But Teasdale takes per- haps a more cynical approach in that nature will not only endure but will carry on without even noticing "that we were gone."

Author Biography

Sara Teasdale was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in August 1884 and committed suicide in New York City in January 1933. She was the youngest child of a prim middle-class family and grew up believing she was a fragile, helpless girl, vulnerable to a variety of undetermined illnesses, both physical and emotional. Her perceived frailty resulted in lifelong bouts of nervous exhaustion and chronic weakness, and she remained dependent upon her parents until she married at age thirty. After being schooled at home, Teasdale ventured out of the house long enough to become acquainted with a local women's poetry group and began writing poetry in her early twenties. Her fondness for music was reflected in the lyric poems she wrote, most very rhythmic and many of which ended up set to musical scores. Her work at the time centered primarily on love from a woman's perspective, and its childlike innocence was widely acclaimed, being published in major poetry journals in Chicago, New York, and Europe.

As well liked as Teasdale's poetry was, the poet herself became just as admired, and she was welcomed into the circles of America's most esteemed early-twentieth-century writers. But in spite of the popularity, Teasdale was her own worst enemy. She often lapsed into depression without a definable cause and suffered a consistent lack of self-confidence, believing she would never be independent or able to live on her own. In the early 1910s, she fretted over finding a husband but worried that the bliss of marriage might dash her inspiration for creativity, which usually derived from sadness and despair. By 1914, she had at least two adoring suitors: Vachel Lindsay, an eccentric, unemployed poet, who spent years walking through the United States trading poems for room and board, and Ernst Filsinger, a St. Louis businessman, savvy in his profession and respectful of the creative arts. Opting for a safer, more sensible environment, Teasdale married Filsinger in 1914 and eventually moved to New York with him where his business expanded into foreign trade.

It did not take long for Teasdale to realize that her marriage was anything but blissful. Although Filsinger was a loving, faithful husband, she could not get beyond her own depression, and she spent many months at sanatoriums in New England. The love lyrics she had initially been so highly praised for turned darker in theme and expression, even though she still attempted to present a woman's perspective and involved the idea of love as much as possible amidst more somber subjects. World War I especially disillusioned her, and both she and her husband maintained pacifist positions throughout the conflict. In 1920, she published her fifth collection of poetry, *Flame and Shadow*, which contains "There Will Come Soft Rains," and which demonstrated her turn toward philosophical and socially conscious themes, while still including love lyrics. But whether it was the turmoil of world events and the changing, conflicting roles of women in society or something deeply personal and emotionally debilitating inside the poet, Teasdale never overcame her sense of hopelessness and despair. In 1929, she divorced her husband against his will and lived alone for the first time in her life. In 1933, she took an overdose of sedatives in her New York apartment and lay down in a tub of water where her nurse found her body the next morning.

Poem Text

There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground,
And swallows circling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pools singing at night,
And wild plum-trees in tremulous white;

Robins will wear their feathery fire
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn,
Would scarcely know that we were gone.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

The verb phrase "will come" in both the title and the first line of "There Will Come Soft Rains" indicates that the poem takes place in the future, but whether the future is an hour away, a day away, or many years away is not clear. Not until the end of the poem is there an implication that the time the poem looks forward to is actually a season away□a time when spring comes around again. The "soft rains" are the gentle showers of springtime that dampen the ground and bring out its earthy scents of wet grass and mud. Spring also means the return of birds, and "swallows" are a good choice to describe as making a "shimmering sound" because of their graceful, swift movements in the air.

Lines 3-4

Lines 3 and 4 introduce more elements of nature in the form of frogs, pools, and plum trees. The frogs are depicted "singing at night" to show their nonchalance toward the world around them. They go about their merry business completely oblivious to what is happening in the human world, which is not revealed until line 7. The plum trees are "wild," implying carefree and natural, but they are also "tremulous," or fearful and timid. The latter description is a foreshadowing of the revelation of war and death in the poem. Although the animals and plants are safe from the madness of humankind, they still reflect the fear and insecurity that people have brought into the environment.

Lines 5-6

Line 5 also contains a foreshadowing image, as the robins are wearing "their feathery fire." While the reddish orange color of robins' breasts may resemble the color of fire, there is likely more to the word choice here than an attempt to match hues. Fire is a part of war. Whether it refers to gunfire itself or to actual fires that often result from hand grenades, cannon balls, or bombs, the intention is to portray the beauty and peacefulness of nature against the horrific imagery of battle. Line 6 reinforces the idea of innocent animals' playfulness and nonchalance amidst human chaos. The robins sit on a fence wire "Whistling their whims" because they do not have the same worries and fears that humans do.

Lines 7-8

Here, the poem reveals its theme. Lines 7 and 8 make an abrupt change in the tone and subject matter, shifting from pastoral scenes of animals enjoying a spring day to the recognition of a war going on. These lines also explain why the poet has been so careful to portray the wild life as completely happy and carefree. Showing them circling

and singing and whistling drives home even harder Teasdale's contention that the natural world is not as foolish as the human world has become. Blissfully ignorant of the destruction and devastation the humans are suffering, the animals do not "know of the war" and "not one / Will care" what the outcome is, for the swallows, frogs, robins, and so forth will remain unaffected.

Lines 9-10

These two lines are perhaps the most dismal in the poem and the most revealing of the poet's true disdain for the act of war. Although there were no atomic or hydrogen bombs used in World War I□the only world war Teasdale lived through□she still seems to recognize the possibility of mankind's total self-annihilation through large-scale violence and bloodshed. The phrase, "If mankind perished utterly," parallels the theme of much of the science fiction stories and novels that would become popular over the decades after the poem was published. Teasdale would be long dead before Ray Bradbury published *The Martian Chronicles* and before World War II would end with the U.S. obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. But the ability to destroy places and people "utterly" is obviously something she could foresee and chose to warn against in her poetry.

Lines 11-12

Line 11 now reveals the time in the future when the soft rains will come. "Spring herself" will show no more concern for human war than do the birds, frogs, and trees. Instead, when the season arrives again, it will not even notice that mankind is no longer around.

Themes

Death and Meaninglessness

World War I brought an entirely new meaning to the idea of conflicts between nations. While thousands of patriots from each of the countries involved went eagerly and confidently into battle, thousands more were shocked by the massive undertaking, never before having witnessed such large-scale political participation in warfare. For many, that shock led to disillusionment with their own governments and depression over the loss of so many young men who fought and died without fully understanding why they were fighting and for whom they were dying. Sara Teasdale was one of the latter.

For years, the poet had used her creativity to write love poems. Her style was simple, elegant, and innocent, expressing feminine sensitivity to romantic relationships, marriage, loss of love, and the beauty of finding it again. Addressing the brutality of physical battle and warring nations did not enter her work until her own emotional response to World War I forced her into it. This was new territory for Teasdale, but she ventured into it with the same simple yet imposing style, changing only her themes to reflect the dark mood and nagging fear that plagued her own mind and her environment. Suddenly, life seemed meaningless. With so many people willing to take up arms and march into strange lands ready to kill or be killed, Teasdale found it difficult to maintain any sense of decency or order in the world, to hold onto a belief in a gentle and peaceful human nature. Both her anger and pessimism are evident in "There Will Come Soft Rains."

The first half of the poem□with its pastoral scenes and pretty depiction of animals and trees in their natural states□is a set-up for the second half when suddenly the tone turns bitter, admonishing mankind's absurd and chaotic behavior. The total disappearance of human beings from the earth is not as far-fetched an idea as it once may have been, and "If mankind perished utterly," it would be by his own hands, a notion the poet believes is evidence of the meaninglessness and disorder in human life. Death is no longer personal and tragic, but impersonal and cursory. A war between several different nations implies dubious reasoning and reckless action, leaving little room to be passionate about life or show respect for individuals. "There Will Come Soft Rains" is a poem that calls out for orderly design and meaning in everyday living, but in this work, only the animals and trees can answer the call.

Detachment

Many writers who address the issue of war and all of its results include the obvious destruction of property and loss of human life as well as the sometimes neglected mention of harm done to wildlife and the natural environment. Novels, short stories, and poems typically portray flora and fauna as helpless, unavoidable bystanders during battle, victims of violence among people and incapable of getting out of the way.

Teasdale's "There Will Come Soft Rains" puts a different spin on the role of nature during wartime, affording it not only the ability to stay alive but to distance itself distinctly and nonchalantly from the entire debacle.

The first six lines of the poem may appear innocent and even childlike in their description of birds and frogs going happily about their day, which consists of sailing through the air, singing by the waterside, and whiling away time on a fence wire, whistling a tune. But the simplicity is both intentional and powerful in providing a foundation for the comparison Teasdale eventually makes between man and nature□man, violent and foolish; nature, beautiful and content. Neither animals nor "wild plum-trees" will fall victim to human violence, for they can and do remain detached from it all. So the first half of the poem illustrates an especially peaceful day among wildlife to make a more compelling, stark contrast to human behavior.

The indifference of nature to mankind's selfdestruction is a theme borne out of disgust with the human race as well as disappointment. Teasdale's well-documented pacifism made her particularly vulnerable to the human tendency to settle disagreements through physical combat, and she was both hurt by it and angered. This poem conveys a point that Teasdale made regularly in her war poetry□ that while human beings may destroy themselves one day, nature will prevail. In a poem also included in *Flame and Shadow* called "In a Garden," she describes the peaceful beauty of apple trees, purple phlox, asters, and roses all offset by the hysteria of a regiment of soldiers suddenly marching nearby. The poem ends with much the same sentiment as "There Will Come Soft Rains," its final line declaring: "Earth takes her children's many sorrows calmly / And stills herself to sleep."

Style

Lyric poetry is poetry that expresses subjective thoughts and feelings in a songlike style, often using both rhythm and rhyme. It is not a coincidence that people who write words to songs are writing "lyrics," but lyric poetry does not necessarily imply a simple, unsophisticated style that must appeal to a mass audience to be considered popular. Truly, many of Teasdale's poems were set to music, especially the early ones in which the themes were lighter and more concerned with love and relationships than depression and war. "There Will Come Soft Rains" is lyrical and the couplets do rhyme, but its dark, cynical subject keeps the poem from falling into a simplistic, naïve category that describes some short, rhyming poems.

The obvious end-rhyming of the lines in this poem is offset by very effective alliteration within the lines. Alliteration is a poetic device used to emphasize the sound of a poem or the way individual words work together to create interesting patterns of repetition. There are two types of alliteration: consonance, which means a repetition of likesounding consonants, and assonance, which means a repetition of like-sounding vowels. Notice the *s* sound in the first couplet, using the words "soft," "smell," "swallows," "circling," "shimmering," and "sound." In only two lines, Teasdale manages to use six words alliteratively without lapsing into overdone poetics or forced intonation. The third couplet also employs very impressive consonance with the *w* sound. The words "will," "wear," "whistling," "whims," and "wire" are, again, effective without being trite. Although "There Will Come Soft Rains" does not contain as much assonance as consonance, there is one example of the repetition of the *long-i* vowel sound in lines 3 and 4 in the words "night," "wild," and "white."

The rhythm of lyric poetry derives from its methodic use of meter throughout. In this poem, each line in the first couplet contains eleven syllables, each line in the second couplet contains nine syllables, as do those in the third, and so forth. The final three couplets have differing syllable counts within their lines, but lines 8-12 follow an 8, 9, 8, 9, 8 syllabic pattern. But in spite of Teasdale's careful attention to poetic style, "There Will Come Soft Rains" is stronger in its meaning than in its form. This helps to make the poem more appealing, as well as more credible, to readers.

Historical Context

Living and writing during the 1910s, Teasdale was exposed to and inspired by some of the most dramatic changes American life had ever encountered. By the time "There Will Come Soft Rains" was published in 1920, the United States had risen to the status of world power, and mass production had made the nation the most highly industrialized in the world. Henry Ford's one millionth Model T had rolled off the newly invented assembly line, selling for a little over $300. Social attitudes loosened remarkably, compared to the previous Victorian era, and women became more outspoken about voting rights, better job opportunities, and greater freedom and independence. In the same year that Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment, 1919, granting women the right to vote, Prohibition was also enacted, a law that would prove futile and pave the way for bootlegging gangsters such as Al Capone and Dutch Schultz. In response to the illegality of alcohol sales, clandestine speakeasies cropped up, providing throngs of customers a place to have a drink and listen to jazz, the music that became increasingly popular during the period.

The decade of the 1910s also saw the rise of labor unions, mostly because of widespread unsafe working conditions. Children were hired for low wages to work long hours in mills, mines, and factories, and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, a result of hazardous workplace conditions, took the lives of 145 female employees. By the middle of the decade, every state had passed a minimum age law for employment, but a federal law with the same restrictions had failed. One of the most remarkable, as well as saddest, occurrences of the 1910s was the sinking of the *Titanic* on April 15, 1912, drowning more than fifteen hundred people after the mighty "unsinkable" ship was ripped apart by an iceberg. But regardless of all the unprecedented social, political, and personal changes that Americans witnessed and endured during this decade, none surpassed the "war to end all wars" in its lasting effect on individual perspective and human life in general.

World War I was the impetus behind Teasdale's writing "There Will Come Soft Rains." When the conflict erupted in 1914, pitting Germany and Austria-Hungary against Great Britain, France, and Russia, American President Woodrow Wilson took a position of neutrality. He insisted, however, on maintaining full trading rights with all the countries on both sides of the battle, a proposal that both Germany and Britain tried to use to its own advantage. While Britain enacted commercial regulations and trade restrictions to try to entice the United States into the war on its side, the Germans resorted to attacking merchant ships with U-boat torpedoes. In May 1915, a submarine torpedoed the British passenger liner *Lusitania*, killing 128 Americans, but still Wilson refused to enter the campaign. Two years later, the U-boats sank several American merchant vessels, and, at about the same time, Americans learned of German foreign minister Arthur Zimmermann's proposal to bring Mexico into the war against the United States. The foreign minister's promise to return Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona to the Mexican government in return for its help in defeating the Americans was essentially the final straw for Woodrow Wilson. Although he had won reelection to the presidency in 1916 on

the slogan "He kept us out of the war," on April 17, 1917, he asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany and received it.

For the United States, World War I lasted only a year and a half. The massive onslaught of American troops to the western front proved too much for Germany and Austria-Hungary□the "Central Powers"□to withstand. Although Germany had been spurred on by the separate peace it had concluded with Russia in March of 1918, the continued efforts of Great Britain, France, and, now, the United States eventually wore down their enemies. On November 11, 1918, the Central Powers surrendered, leaving 112,432 Americans dead, more than half having died of disease.

Because this was a relatively brief encounter for the United States, history does not record it as having as great an impact on American society as other conflicts, in particular, the Civil War, World War II, and Vietnam. However, the effect was deep and indelible for some, including Teasdale. Her anti-war poems reflect not only a sadness and depression over the horrors of battle, but also anger and cynicism toward, in her opinion, such a senseless loss of life. "There Will Come Soft Rains" stresses the beauty and peacefulness of nature in contrast to the foolish brutality of mankind. Many other poets, writers, and artists of the period also felt disillusionment with the American government, as well as a stifling of their creative arts by the authorities. During the 1920s, a group of writers from the "Lost Generation" left the United States to live and write in France. These self-exiled expatriates sought freedom to write what they wanted, which was realistic fiction, uncensored in its use of profanity and sexual content and more reflective, they believed, of the world around them. This group included such Teasdale contemporaries as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Henry Miller, and John Dos Passos.

Back in the United States, the Roaring Twenties were underway with a boom in automobile sales and the increasing popularity of radios and movies. Women's fashion was out of control during the "Flapper Age," named for a style of sacklike dress with no bosom, no waistline, and lots of feathers and silky fringe. This was also the decade when cosmetic manufacturing took off, and women flocked to stores for powder, rouge, lipstick, eye shadow, and nail polish. Another dubious practice that became fashionable during this time was buying on credit, leading to a very active stock market and rising economy. By the end of the decade, however, the party was over. On October 24, 1929, the stock market crashed, resulting in closed banks and widespread panic among consumers. Black Thursday, as the day was called, was the beginning of an economic depression that would last throughout most of the 1930s. Teasdale would not live to see the recovery nor the beginning of a second world war, more lengthy, more devastating than the first.

Critical Overview

Teasdale's early popularity is reflected in her winning the first Columbia Poetry Prize in 1918, an award that would later be called the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Her work was especially liked for its lyrical style and musical rhythm, and it was received equally well by male critics as well as by female critics, even though the subjects were often sensitive and sentimental. At least two critics who reviewed *Flame and Shadow* shortly after it was published found the collection stronger than her previous work, although similar in theme and tone. Writing for *The Bookman*, reviewer Louis Untermeyer claims the book

> is by no means a series of facile melodies that live only to be set to music or to fill a page. . . . Here are new rhythms, far more subtle than those she has ever employed; here are words chosen with a keener sense of their actual as well as their musical value.

Mark Van Doren, writing for the *Nation*, admonishes Teasdale for still being tempted "to deal exclusively in stock love-lyric materials," but praises the poems that go beyond her typical theme: "Sara Teasdale only reaches her perfection when, defeating her temptations, she interpenetrates pain with metaphor and metaphor with pain, when she finds the proper balance between fire and form."

Because *Flame and Shadow* contains a section of poems addressing World War I and such meditative themes as human self-destruction and nature's beauty versus mankind's ugliness, critics claimed that this book demonstrated a growth in Teasdale's intellectual work and philosophical thought. Ironically, the development of her artistry paralleled her deepening depression, and the more she centered her poetry on pessimistic themes, the more her own self-examination left her distraught and disillusioned. After Teasdale's suicide in 1933, her work eventually faded from academic venues, and critics simply moved on to other poets. However, she was still popular with nonacademic audiences, and *The Collected Poems*, which came out four years after her death, went through more than twenty printings before 1966, when it was republished in paperback. Her work was kept alive in the 1970s when the feminist movement came about. Many contemporary women regarded her as one who struggled valiantly with the revolutionary changes that swept society during the early twentieth century, revamping the roles of females and yet still placing on them demands and restrictions that were confusing at best, debilitating at worst. Today, critics maintain a fair amount of attention on Teasdale's work, and there are many volumes of criticism available that address it along with other poetry of the period. Most textbooks and anthologies, however, neglect to include her poems in their publications.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in poetry journals, and is an associate editor for a university communications department. In the following essay, she contends that the peacefulness and beauty of nature described in the poem serve as evidence of Teasdale's acute cynicism toward humankind.

For as long as human beings have been writing poetry, fiction, and philosophical or religious essays, they have addressed the conditions of the world around them. Some writings have tried to teach moral lessons through everything from didactic preaching to ribald comedy, and some have simply presented themselves as lamentations on hopeless situations and the downfall of man. Still other writings have celebrated the human condition, telling stories of great achievements, great romances, and great friendships. Of course, most writers prior to the nineteenth century were men, and much of the poetry and other writing that addressed one major phenomenon unique to humans in the animal kingdom□war□did so in terms of glory and grandeur. Themes centered on valor and victory, pride and strength, and nobility in dying for a cause. More recent writers have been wondering just what the "cause" is, and Sara Teasdale is one of them. That notion□coupled with the fact that she was a woman□makes "There Will Come Soft Rains" all the more intriguing and forceful in its portrayal of humankind's bleak future.

The most powerful statement in this poem is Teasdale's claim that neither animals nor plants "would mind . . . / If mankind perished utterly." Many other futuristic poems and fictional accounts tell the story of a total destruction of life as a result of wars started by human beings□total in that the demise of man also means the demise of dogs and cats and elephants and geraniums and roses and so on. The rationale behind this dismal prediction is that domesticated animals have become dependent on human masters for survival and that wild animals and plants will die out because the aftermath of radiation or other bomb residue is sure to poison the air and water or block out the sun's rays. Teasdale paints a different picture in "There Will Come Soft Rains." She steps back from the conclusion that everything will perish in favor of the more cynical view that all living things other than humans will carry on as normal, not even noticing our absence.

When Ray Bradbury adopted the name of Teasdale's poem for his short story about a thinking, talking, fully-automated house of the future (2026, to be exact), he also adopted the idea of man's self-destruction through all-out war. Briefly, this tale is told from the house's point of view□ the reader is unaware in the beginning that the people who lived there are all dead because the house still rings bells to awaken them, calls out for them to get up, makes breakfast for them, and so forth. Not until Bradbury describes the eerie silhouettes of a man, woman, and two children imprinted on an outside wall of the house does the reader understand what has happened. The family was apparently caught off-guard by an attack that occurred in their small California town, and only the charred outlines of their bodies remain as evidence of their existence. The shadowy figures are still posed as the humans' last moments on earth were spent□ mowing grass, picking flowers, playing ball. The family dog, trapped inside

the house with no one to feed him or free him, wanders aimlessly for several days before dying of starvation and madness. Eventually, the house catches fire when cleaning liquid spills across the kitchen stove, and it, too, "dies."

Again, this scenario is a familiar one in futuristic writing. It foretells a complete loss of life in a nuclear war. Even if the thing lost is inhuman, such as the dog or the house in the Bradbury tale, it is all a part of the belief that humankind rules the earth and nothing can survive without us. It is interesting that the science fiction writer of the midtwentieth century took a poignantly different approach from the poet of the early-twentieth century who originated the title of both pieces□interesting and ironic. Because Teasdale's animals and plants live happily on after man is gone, the reader is tempted to think that hers is the more positive outcome. After all, the death of everything must be more distressful and ominous than a war that eliminates people but mercifully leaves the rest of Mother Nature alone. Not necessarily. Teasdale's theme is actually more disturbing than Bradbury's because it demonstrates a wholesale disregard for mankind's coming and going. Man is not so evil that everything we have touched will die; instead, man is so evil that our self-destruction is not worthy of noticing.

The first half of "There Will Come Soft Rains" does not even mention human beings. It reads like an exaltation of nature with its placid descriptions of gentle rains, the smell of the earth, swallows flying about, frogs singing, and robins whistling. This scene sets the stage for Teasdale's sudden ironic turn. Juxtaposing the beauty of the natural world against the sudden mention of "the war" convinces the reader that there is more going on here than a pretty little poem about birds and trees. But even though the subject changes, the perspective is still nature's. While human calamity rages on, the animals and plants are oblivious to it□"not one will know" that the conflict is even happening. But Teasdale does not stop with nature's lack of knowledge, for that could be interpreted as simple ignorance or the absence of intellectual ability. Rather, she makes sure the point is not missed by bringing attitude into the picture. Not only will birds and trees not know of the war but "not one / Will care." Furthermore, "Not one would mind." The words "care" and "mind" are actually human attributes, so applying them to non-human beings adds deeper insult to the race that is supposed to be superior to all else. Even "Spring herself" will be ambivalent about mankind's departure because the seasons of the year hardly need people around to keep time and the earth turning as usual.

It may be argued that the poet's cynical approach really is not cynicism at all; rather, she contends that animals and plants will survive human war only because she cannot know of a weapon so massive and so destructive that anything in its vicinity will perish□people, animals, trees, buildings, automobiles, virtually everything. The atomic bomb had not yet been invented. The language of this poem, however, still suggests disdain for and anger toward man's participation in deadly combat. Had she portrayed an outcome that claimed the natural world would not know of the war and left it at that, perhaps the reader could accept her obvious lack of knowledge of what would occur in the next world war, one she did not live to see. But the fact that nature will neither care nor mind in this poet's calculation suggests something much more cynical, much darker, than simply not being able to predict the real future.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "There Will Come Soft Rains," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Piano is a Ph.D. candidate in English at Bowling Green State University. In the following essay, she analyzes how Teasdale's lyric poem reflects the indifference of the natural world to the destruction of humanity during war time.

During World War I, many American and British poets expressed through their poetry their feelings of outrage and horror about the loss of a generation of young men killed in the fields of Northern Europe. Sara Teasdale, a young American poet known more for her love poetry than political statements, contributed to these anti-war sentiments in her lyric poem "There Will Come Soft Rains." As defined by literary critic M. H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, a lyric poem is "any fairly short poem, consisting of the utterance by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception." Written in the lyric tradition, this poem illuminates a brief but startling picture of the natural world's indifference to the foibles and follies of humankind. Teasdale does this by creating an extended description of the natural world as being completely involved in its own cycle of life while war rages on in another part of the world. Impervious to humankind's ability to destroy itself, the natural world exists in an untouched parallel universe. Most intriguing about this poem is its ability to contrast the timelessness of the natural world with the transience of humanity to reveal an utterly devastating point: regardless of the destructive impulse that impels nation-states to destroy each other, the natural world continues to exist. Thus, this poem sends a poignant message about how little affected the natural world would be by the destruction of human life.

Although Teasdale's poetry may lack an extensive use of literary devices, such as similes and tropes, it is important not to dismiss her work as simplistic or sentimental. Her direct use of language and her song-like verse contain deep and hidden meanings that may take more than one reading to discern. As many of her critics and admirers note, Teasdale's popularity as a poet was based on the appearance of a simple style that often hid complex meanings. In *The New Era in American Poetry*, critic Louis Untermeyer notes that Teasdale had "a genius for the song, for the pure lyric in which words seem to have fallen into place without art or effort." However, her ability to write a poem that adeptly moves from a feeling of peaceful, rustic tranquility to a searing critique of the futility of war in only twelve lines is no easy achievement.

The deceptive quality of Teasdale's art lies in her subtle use of description to set a particular mood that changes in tone throughout the poem. For example, the opening lines of this poem create a sense of beauty and peacefulness in the natural world, of gentle rain and the fresh smell of earth, of birds flying and trees blooming. It is spring time, a time of new life and new beginnings. This extended description of the natural world views life as active and vibrant, as well as undisturbed, because it is night time when most humans are asleep. Although a portrait of tranquility, these lines set up the rest of the poem's overriding idea that the natural world is impervious to humans and could easily exist without them. The suggestion is that the tranquility of this rustic tableau is partially due to the lack of human interference.

The poem creates a constant movement between the natural world and that of humans through its tonal shifts. Thus, a portrait of pastoral tranquility set up early in the poem becomes a moment of meditating on the futility of war later on. It is this tension that creates the drama in the poem. For example, in the first two stanzas, the natural world has its own rhythms and sense of time. The frequent use of the conjunction "and" and the verb ending "-ing" reveals this sense of natural time as being continual and undisturbed by human activity. Moreover, the use of end rhymes in the beginning two stanzas, such as "ground" and "sound" and "night" and "white," contribute to the notion of a world that is able to sustain itself without the influence of humans. However, the consistent use of the conjunction "and" also creates a subtle sense of suspense as if something is about to happen. However, nothing really changes in the scene of nature; the timing is cyclical and continual rather than linear. Thus, the suspenseful use of "and" indicates a change of tone in the poem similar to a break in a song.

In the third stanza, the natural world is once again described, only this time the poet focuses on robins to reveal the natural world's isolation from humanity. Here a close-up view is given of robins "whistling their whims on a low fence-wire." Although it appears like a seemingly innocuous description, this stanza conveys a strong sense of detachment from human concerns. In particular, the excessive use of *alliteration*, such as "feathery fire" and "whistling their whims," reinforces the feeling of a world in tune with its own rhythm and far removed from that of humans. The subtle change in tone that occurs in this stanza is noted by the use of off-rhymes, such as "fire" and "fence-wire," rather than the end rhymes that preceded this stanza. This change in rhyme pattern prepares the reader for another disruption in the poem's mood. The fourth stanza reveals this mood change as the poem leaves the natural world momentarily to contemplate the separation of the human and natural worlds through direct reference to the war and the sobering fact that "not one / Will care at last when it is done."

In the "Introduction" to *Mirror of the Heart: Poems of Sara Teasdale*, critic and biographer William Drake claims that "for Teasdale the point of a lyric was not merely to state an emotion . . . but to clarify and analyze, to coax it from the dim regions of disquiet into consciousness." Thus, the rest of the poem reflects on how the natural world co-exists with the human world, yet ultimately humanity's despairing moments, such as during times of war, have little or no effect on it. Although the ravages of war seem to loom large in the speaker's mind, in the natural world the war does not even exist. A wistful feeling is expressed here that being as divested of human matters as the natural world is a desirable state. Although the natural world can be indifferent to human foibles, it is impossible for humans to be because of their consciousness.

The last two stanzas examine the insignificance of war in light of the natural world's response to it. As the speaker makes clear, the negation of human existence would have little effect on the natural world's cyclical and enduring concept of time. The movement from the future to subjunctive tense makes the last two stanzas speculative. If it were to happen that "mankind perished utterly," then "Spring herself / Would scarcely know that we were gone." This grim prognosis gives the reader an opportunity to reflect on how destructive impulses that propel humans to announce war on each other have little resonance in the natural world. Although a disturbing thought, it points

to the egocentric and self-motivated will of humankind to see themselves as the center of the universe. From this unusual point of view, Teasdale suggests that humankind's concept of time that privileges the temporal over the cyclical contributes to our ability to destroy each other. The dissonance between these two worlds, that of humans and the natural world, is linguistically noted by Teasdale's subtle but exquisite use of the slant rhyme, "dawn" and "gone," that ends the poem's last stanza.

Source: Doreen Piano, Critical Essay on "There Will Come Soft Rains," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

Many of Teasdale's lyric poems have been set to music and recorded by numerous individual singers and groups. A general Internet search under "Sara Teasdale recordings" brings up over fifty pages of information on song titles, the artists who recorded them, and, in some cases, where they are available for purchasing or borrowing.

Topics for Further Study

Lyric poetry encompasses a wide range of styles and presentations, although it does prescribe certain guidelines. After familiarizing yourself with those guidelines and with the work of various lyric poets, compare Sara Teasdale's poetry to Walt Whitman's. How are they similar and how do they differ?

Read Ray Bradbury's short story, "There Will Come Soft Rains" and write an essay explaining why you think his interpretation of the world's future□in a science fiction sense□is more or less frightening than Teasdale's.

World War I was called "the war to end all wars." Why do you think this phrase came about, and how do you believe people interpreted it as the conflict was going on? Why did the First World War *not* end all others?

"Lost Generation" was the nickname of Americans in their twenties and thirties during the 1920s. In particular, it described those who felt disillusioned with their own government and society, so not everyone who fit the age category would have appreciated the term. What is the nickname of your generation, or what would you call it if it were up to you? What does the name say about your generation, and how do you reflect it or reject it?

Compare and Contrast

1917: The Selective Service Act is passed, forcing men between twenty and thirty to enlist for military service. The first drafted American troops arrive in France in October to begin America's involvement in World War I.

Today: The Center on Conscience and War continues its struggle to end funding for draft registration. The organization made progress when the House of Representatives agreed and voted to end government financial support of selective service. However, the Senate voted to restore funding and, today, males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five are required to register for the draft.

1921: President Warren G. Harding pardons Socialist Labor Party candidate Eugene V. Debs, allowing for his release from prison. Debs had been sentenced to ten years behind bars for his controversial anti-war speeches delivered during World War I.

Today: Before leaving office, President Bill Clinton announces controversial pardons of several convicted white-collar criminals. Perhaps the most disturbing was his pardon of fugitive financier Marc Rich, who was indicted in 1983 on charges of tax evasion, fraud, and participation in illegal oil deals with Iran. Before he could face trial, Rich left the country and settled in Switzerland.

1924: Nellie Ross of Wyoming and Miriam Ferguson of Texas become the first female governors in the United States.

Today: A record five women hold positions as governors in the states of New Hampshire, Montana, Delaware, Arizona, and New Jersey. In addition, there are twelve female senators and a record fifty-nine female members of the House of Representatives.

What Do I Read Next?

World War I is explored from an interesting perspective in Gary Mead's *The Doughboys: America and the First World War*, published in 2000. Readers may be surprised to learn about how the United States's own allies tried to use American involvement in favor of their respective nations as well as against the enemies. This book is lengthy but reads more like a novel than a history text.

Richard Rhodes's 1995 publication of *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* gives readers an inside look at "super" science, postwar politics, espionage, and moral challenges all rolled into one. This book is different in its account of the bomb's creation in that it not only provides the facts of scientific discovery, but also the personality quirks and sometimes odd details of the physicists who brought it about.

Most people recall the photograph taken during the Vietnam War of a young girl running nude down a road amid a throng of other horrified people, her body seared in a napalm attack. That child was nine-year-old Kim Phuc whose biography is told in Denise Chong's *The Girl in the Picture: The Story of Kim Phuc, the Photographer and the Vietnam War*, published in 2000. The book recounts her amazing survival, her relationship with both Americans and the North Vietnamese, and her present life in Canada with her husband and two sons.

First published in 1937, *The Collected Poems of Sara Teasdale* has been through numerous editions and reprinting and is easily available in libraries. This is an excellent compilation of her work, including many of the simple love lyrics that made her famous, as well as the darker poems that she wrote in the years before her suicide.

During World War I, Vera Brittain volunteered as a nurse in military hospitals in England and France. Like so many others, Brittain was horrified by the magnitude of the war, and she lost her boyfriend, a brother, and two close friends on the battlefields. Their stories are told around a collection of letters they wrote to one another during the war in a book called *Letters from a Lost Generation* (1999), edited by Alan Bishop and Mark Bostridge.

Further Study

Drake, William, *Sara Teasdale: Woman and Poet*, Harper and Row, 1979.

This biography of Teasdale is one of only a handful that have been written. Drake is the first biographer to gain permission from the poet's literary executor, Margaret Conklin, to quote directly from Teasdale's letters and other unpublished materials. As he notes in the book's preface, his intent was to "reconstruct the tragic history of a vivid and sensitive personality, with respect and sympathy." That makes this biography an excellent read.

Schoen, Carol B., *Sara Teasdale*, Twayne Publishers, 1986.

This is a critical study of Teasdale's poetry, covering all her works and including aspects of her personal life that had a direct bearing on her subjects and themes. Schoen considers her one of the best lyric poets in history and one who has been overlooked too long by critics favoring more controversial or militant female poets.

Teasdale, Sara, *Sonnets to Duse, and Other Poems*, Poet Lore Company, 1907.

While this first collection of Teasdale's may be available for reading only in the library, it is worth being acquainted with the poet's beginnings and the work she was doing at age twenty-three. Eleonora Duse was a famous actress whom Teasdale idolized but never met.

□, *Strange Victory*, Macmillan, 1933.

This is a collection of the last poetry Teasdale wrote before killing herself in 1933. On instructions the poet had left in her notebooks, literary executor Margaret Conklin gathered the poems and had them published with the title that Teasdale had chosen.

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□, *The New Era in American Poetry*, H. Holt, 1919, p. 267.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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