Trouble with Math in a One-Room Country School Study Guide

Trouble with Math in a One-Room Country School by Jane Kenyon

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"Trouble with Math in aOne-Room Country School" first appeared in 1986 in Jane Kenyon's second volume of poems, *The Boat of Quiet Hours,* and again in her collection of new and selected poems, *Otherwise* (1996). In both prose and poems, Kenyon readily confesses that math was her weakest subject. This poem recalls a humiliating moment in elementary school when academic difficulty leads to punishment, not help. In her case, it also leads to an inner change, a heart newly "hardened against authority." In the short span of this three-stanza, 25-line poem we learn much about the settings, both outer and inner, for the change that takes place.

Aside from the title, the poem does not specifically identify the nature of her trouble, nor does it directly track the processes of her inner transformation. The poem delivers this "information" obliquely. As a result, the context of her "trouble with math" expands in the widening rings of sensory details, such as "the smell / of sweeping compound," the startling image of Christ on Ann's blue bookmark, and the sound of a Haydn melody hummed in the furnace closet. These indirections help tell a story far larger than the central issue or event itself. "Trouble with Math in a One-Room Country School" is typical of Kenyon's attention to a single moment, and of her ability to make it present through sensory detail and clear, spare language. The poem provides insight into the mind of a child: what she perceives, and how she copes with adult perceptions.

Author Biography

When Jane Kenyon died from leukemia on April 23, 1995, one month short of her 48th birthday, she had lived nearly twenty years in ruralWilmot, New Hampshire, with her husband, poet Donald Hall. "Eagle Pond" had been the home of Hall' s family for generations, and it became the setting from which her mature poetry emerged. The farmhouse and countryside around Wilmot reminded Kenyon of her Michigan childhood before its landscape became paved over and subdivided: "The move to New Hampshire was a restoration of a kind of paradise," she told an interviewer.

Kenyon was born on May 23, 1947, and grew up in an old house "crowded with pictures, books, and music" on the rural outskirts of Ann Arbor, Michigan, home of theUniversity of Michigan. Her parents were freelancers, according to Donald Hall's afterword in *Otherwise.* Reuel Kenyon was a jazz pianist, and Polly Kenyon a singer, seamstress, and sewing teacher. Jane attended a one-room country school until the fifth grade, and thereafter walked two miles along gravel roads to the annexed Foster School,Ann Arbor Township, No. 16 Fractional. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Kenyon speculates that "growing up in the country far from friends made me an inward child," and a lover of the natural world. This love and capacity for solitude rings dominant both in her poetry and in^ *Hundred White Daffodils* (1999), a posthumous collection of Kenyon's miscellaneous prose, interviews, and translations of the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova.

"Childhood, when you are in it, seems to last forever," Kenyon begins an unfinished essay from that volume. She goes on to recall that "the central psychic fact" of her own seemingly endless childhood was "Grandmother's spiritual obsession, and her effort to secure me in her religious fold." Jane and her brother Reuel spent a great deal of time in their paternal grandmother's big boarding house near theUniversity of Michigan. There her grandmother, Dora Kenyon, talked endlessly of the Second Coming of Christ, using apocalyptic language which Jane sometimes interpreted whimsically: "Jesus would come out of the clouds, or, as my imagination had it, he'd walk down a sunbeam like a ramp, to judge us□rather like Santa Clause, as I understood *him."* But more often, she was fearful. After all, God might come as "a thief in the night" to judge the world, and those not found in the Book of Life were bound for a violent, fiery end. As she imagined the Second Coming, "I was quite certain that Jesus would not wait while I fumbled with curlers and pajama buttons," and "it was hard for me to fall asleep at

925 South State Street." Grandmother Dora's authoritative spirituality and Kenyon's adolescent rejection of it is a kind of paradigm for several key images in "Trouble with Math in aOne-Room Country School." "I grew contemptuous of religion and the people I knew who practiced it," says Kenyon, "although I took great pains to hide this development from Grandmother."

Besides the authority of her intense grandmother, the authority of public schooling was also a persistent source of "trouble" for Jane Kenyon. She confesses in "Dreams of Math," a column for the *The Concord Monitor,*

It troubled me throughout my education that I had to obey and perform for teachers whose judgment I didn't respect. I had a few teachers whom I respected enormously, a middling group of ordinary mortals, and finally an index of teachers I thought ill of, who nonetheless had the power to determine the course of my education and my life.

"Trouble," in particular, took the form of math anxiety. In elementary school she discovered early on that letters, reading, spelling made sense to me, but numbers had such strange proclivities. That zero times four was zero, canceling the existence of the four, seemed dubious at best.

And in high school, "even geometry, which my friends told me I'd be able to master, bollixed me.... I turned to arts and letters, where I felt on safer ground."

From high school in Ann Arbor, Kenyon went on to theUniversity of Michigan, earning a B.A. in 1970 and an M. A. in English in 1972. That same year, she married Donald Hall, a poet and English professor 19 years her senior. Hall gave up his academic position in 1975 and the two moved to the New Hampshire farmhouse in Wilmot, near the foot ofMt. Kearsage. Grudgingly at first, Kenyon also began attending church with Hall inDanbury where his family had been longstanding members. There she heard pastor Jack Jensen's well-crafted, intelligent sermons about "a God who overcomes you with love, not a God of rules and prohibitions." Gradually she found belief displacing fear.

In 1978, Alice James Books published Kenyon's first volume of poetry, *From Room to Room,* which critic Robin Latimer calls "the poetic diary of a honeymoon." The volumes that follow, *The Boat of Quiet Hours* (1986), *Let Evening Come* (1990), *Constance* (1993), and the posthumous *Otherwise* (1996), chronicle Kenyon's lucid attention to New Hampshire's fickle weather and staid inhabitants, the seasonal cycles of garden and town life, Don's cancer, her constant bout with depression, and eventually, her own imminent death. "Trouble with Math in aOne-Room Country School" departs from the here and now of Kenyon's adult life to recall a formative moment in her past. It bears her characteristic clarity and ability to embrace transformation in the midst of continuance: "She led me, blinking / and changed, back to class."

Poem Text

The others bent their heads and started in.

Confused, I asked my neighbor

to explain□a sturdy, bright-cheeked girl

who brought raw milk to school from her family's

herd ofHolsteins. Ann had a blue bookmark,

and on it Christ revealed his beating heart,

holding the flesh back with His wounded hand.

Ann understood division__

Miss Moran sprang from her monumental desk

and led me roughly through the class

without a word. My shame was radical

as she propelled me past the cloakroom

to the furnace closet, where only the boys

were put, only the older ones at that.

The door swung briskly shut.

The warmth, the gloom, the smell

of sweeping compound clinging to the broom

soothed me. I found a bucket, turned it

upside down, and sat, hugging my knees.

I hummed a theme from Haydn that I knew

from my piano lessons ...

and hardened my heart against authority.

And then I heard her steps, her fingers

on the latch. She led me, blinking and changed, back to the class.

Plot Summary

Lines: 1-3

The title provides many of the "facts" for this poem at the outset, informing the reader just what the "trouble" is and where it will take place. In the context of the title, therefore, the meaning of the first line is clear: the poem's speaker is a student left behind while all the rest have begun working their math problems, perhaps for a quiz. The scene is a familiar one to many students, and so is the method for coping. The girl resorts to seeking help from her "neighbor," a word traditionally used for a student who sits adjacent to another. If we identify the "I" with Jane Kenyon herself, the farm girl could also have literally been a "neighbor," since the Kenyon family lived across the street from a large working farm in rural Michigan.

Lines: 3-8

In the middle of the third line, we begin to follow the "confused" girl's path of perception, which strays momentarily from the trouble at hand to keen observation of her "neighbor." With a few very deft strokes, we know by implication that this "neighbor" is a ruddy, healthy farm girl whose family is likely quite religious. She brings not only "raw milk" to school but also the "raw" image of Christ baring his heart and wounds. In any poem, particularly a short lyric, each and every word must have a role in conveying sound, sense, or image. One may wonder at first why the poem seems to wander from the trouble at hand—why is this description necessary? Perhaps that is the point. It is a foray with purpose, in the poem's context, in part explaining why the girl has trouble with math, as Kenyon did in her own life. A child like Kenyon is more likely to be absorbed in the details of person, place, and moment than in the abstractions and rote applications of numbers.

The description also touches upon a key feature of Kenyon's own biography, the authoritative presence of her rigidly religious grandmother, who spoke relentlessly and frighteningly about the Second Coming of Christ. But it is dangerous to ascribe biographical details too closely to a poem's reading, thereby distorting or reducing a detail or image by pressing it into biographical service. Here, the passionate and wounded Christ on the blue bookmark is juxtaposed with the fact that "Ann understood division." Kenyon could have placed "Ann understood division" on line three, and it would have made perfect sense that she would ask a student who "understood division" to "explain." The fact is still present. But in its actual position in the poem, this line gathers meaning that resonates with the image on the blue bookmark. Ann is not the only one who understood division; so does that "wounded hand," but in much more than a mathematical context. The stanza ends in an ellipsis, a technique of punctuation Kenyon used often. Here it directs the reader into the "something more" that could be said, yet isn't. It asks us to consider the various ways "division" could be understood in light of the images that have gone before.

Lines: 9-11

In the second stanza, the girl's reverie is interrupted abruptly. Miss Moran catches her "asking" a neighbor for help, and obviously thinks she is cheating. Whether Miss Moran herself is large in actual stature or small seems irrelevant; her authority is obviously massive. The poem indicates that fact obliquely, not directly, through a *synecdoche* for that authority, "her monumental desk." A *synecdoche* is a figure of speech in which a part is used for a whole. "Throne," for example, is a familiar *synecdoche* for "king" or "queen," as in "You must lay your complaint before the throne." The adjective "monumental" modifies "desk," but by extension gives the teacher's authority a sense of massiveness, of towering institutional rigidity. Miss Moran acts swiftly to dispense discipline, but like a monument, performs it silently, "without a word." The verbs speak for Miss Moran instead, telling all in the way she "sprang" from her desk and "led me roughly through the class." Clearly unused to being punished, Kenyon recalls, "My shame was radical." "Radical" carries here not only its usual sense of "extreme," but also, in the word's oldest meaning, of "coming from the root," in Latin, the *radix.* Her shame arose from the very root or foundation of her being.

Lines: 12-15

One can easily imagine the mortified, red face and averted eyes of this young girl, as her teacher "propels" her to the hellish "furnace closet," a place reserved only for the worst offenders, usually the older boys. That realization not only increases her shame, but also propels her ever more intensely toward decisive change. The stanza ends as abruptly as it began, with the closet door swinging "briskly shut."

Lines: 16-19

The incarceration doesn't have the desired effect, however. Strangely enough, the girl's shame is soon "soothed" inside the closet by the warmth and clean, familiar "smell/of sweeping compound," even by the "gloom." As she quietly fashions a makeshift seat and hugs her knees, we learn that this young girl has a peculiar strength and capacity to comfort herself.

Lines: 20-22

There in the semi-darkness she comforts herself with a phrase of music, calls upon her inner resources, and decides not to acquiesce to such injustice. Authority, she has just learned, is to be questioned, and if necessary, resisted: "I ... hardened my heart against authority." Among other things, the ellipsis at the end of line 21 gives the illusion of time passing in reflection and eventual resolve, which is named in line 22.

Lines: 23-25

The anecdote, or brief story, concludes with the girl's release from her punitive cell. The poem provides us the "inside view" from the closet where, along with the girl, we hear Miss Moran's "fingers / on the latch" and we know what Miss Moran cannot know: the girl's "change" has nothing to do with the penitence Miss Moran intended. The girl is "blinking" not only because her eyes are adjusting from dark closet to bright classroom, but because she is also adjusting, figuratively, to the new light of her resolve.

Themes

Education

Few people living today have ever experienced education in a "one-room country school." But many can identify with the first half of this poem's title, "Trouble with Math." These days we say such people suffer from "math anxiety." There's hardly anyone who cannot recall having some sort of trouble in school: with a particular subject, in being misunderstood and suffering the consequences, in finding oneself "alien" to the approach of a particular teacher, with the social dimension of school, or even with conventional schooling in general. This poem is not the only one in Kenyon's corpus that expresses her unhappiness with school. "Three Songs at the End of Summer" ends with a memory of standing scrubbed and neat in new clothes, "waiting for the school bus / with a dread that took my breath away,"

holding ... the new books□words, numbers, and operations with numbers I did not comprehend□and crayons, unspoiled by use, in a blue canvas satchel with red leather straps. Spruce, inadequate, and alien I stood at the side of the road. It was the only life I had.

The "white indifferent morning sky" arching overhead reminds us of Miss Moran's "monumental desk," both metaphors for the remote indifference of teachers to Kenyon's particular intelligence. The young Kenyon recognizes this more serious "trouble" early on, according to "Learning in the First Grade." In that poem, she yields to the teacher's authority, grudgingly supplying the answer expected, not the one she knows to be true:

Oh, but my mind was finical. It put the teacher perpetually in the wrong. Called on, however, I said aloud: "The cup is red." "But it's not," I thought, like Galileo Galilei muttering under his beard__

There's a wry humor in this comparison of a savvy little girl to the famous Renaissance genius. But it also suggests a painful truth about many educational systems and their widely varying abilities to recognize and nurture the native genius of children, especially when those children don't conveniently conform to the theoretical model of a "good student." In the place and time Jane Kenyon attended elementary school, few formal resources existed for helping children with difficulties, or "learning issues," as we now say. Often a child's "problem" was judged to be moral, and the correction to her perceived laziness, dishonesty, or disobedience was simply punishment. Miss Moran obviously thought the little girl was cheating. Rather than explore her confusion and need for help, this teacher consigned her to academic purgatory, where it was assumed she would become contrite and penitent.

"Trouble with Math inOne-Room Country School" has little to say, ultimately, about a child's difficulty comprehending operations with numbers. Instead, it is a story about the unintended learning that occurs in school. The child in this poem learns very little about

math that day. Rather, it is her heart and will that have been educated, in the oldest sense of the word educated, "led out." She has been "led out" from the furnace closet having forged a new relationship to authority, and a new comprehension of her own strength. Meanwhile, with the quiet self-containment characteristic of Jane Kenyon and her poetry, this child would continue to endure school as though in a little boat:

"All day in my imagination my body floated Above the classroom, navigating easily between fluorescent

shoals ..... and no one knew I was not where

I seemed to be.... "("The Little Boat" *Otherwise* 98-99).

Enclosures and Freedom

The second half of this poem's title tells where the trouble takes place: in the small confines of a "one-room country school." This setting is a variation on another theme recurring both in this poem and in Kenyon's work at large: the paradoxes of enclosure and freedom, confinement and release, binding and letting go. Rooms, closets, drawers, and other enclosed spaces often garner the attention in a Kenyon poem. In "Trouble with Math in aOne-Room Country School," the fact that the school consists of "one room" is significant. All that can happen happens in that one enclosure, a microcosm where the drama between child and teacher, perception and truth, intention and outcome, is played out. If "all the world's a stage," according to Shakespeare, then the opposite is also true. This one-room stage is also a world where a suffering Christ "confined" in an image on a narrow blue bookmark finds dramatic parallel in the dark closet from which a suffering child emerges "blinking" in the new light of her transformation. Room within a room, the furnace closet or school "jail" becomes the unlikely place where inner freedom is wrought. Thus, this poem finds its place among other more famous expressions of freedom-in-confinement, notably Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim 's Progress.*

It doesn't take long, reading through Kenyon's poems, to notice how often they feature small rooms or closets as the locus for revelation and transformation. *From Room to Room* is the title of Kenyon's first collection of poems, in large part reflecting the experience of moving to her husband's family home in New Hampshire early in their marriage, and taking on a new life with its new enclosures and freedoms: "I move from room to room, a little dazed, like the fly. I watch it bump against each window." She feels "clumsy here" among the artifacts of her husband's ancestral past, and disembodied, "Out of my body for a while, / weightless in space." Another poem notes, in contrast, that her husband "always belonged here.... certain as a rock," while she's "the one who worries / if I fit in with the furniture / and the landscape." It doesn't take long, however, for Kenyon to feel what writer Simone Weil calls "gravity and grace" take hold, as she refreshes the cliche "putting down roots" with a new image: "I feel my life start up again, like a cutting when it grows the first pale and tentative root hair in a glass of water." In

"From to Room to Room," Kenyon expresses the paradox of freedom-in-bondage, the necessity of being tethered in order to explore, of being bound in order to be freed:

"Blessed be the tie that binds ... "we sing in the church down the road. And how does it go from there? The tie ... the tether, the hose carrying oxygen to the astronaut, turning, turning outside the hatch, taking a look around.

By telling the story of her "trouble with math" with an emphasis on the room that holds the dynamic mix of feeling, action, perception, and change, Jane Kenyon's poem shows us the importance of the settings for our own life-stories. Finally, the poem explores an aspect of freedom the paradox of great-in-small-that poet Langston Hughes also recognized when he wrote: Freedom is a strong seed planted in a great need.

Style

If you were to hear Jane Kenyon read aloud "Trouble with Math in aOne-Room Country School" and not know it is broken into 25 lines and divided into three stanzas, it might sound like a well-crafted brief story, or *anecdote.* Yet, Kenyon did set her experience within the "confines" of a poetic form, the style called "free verse." Like the thematic paradox of freedom and enclosure that shapes this poem, "free verse" is not freedom *from* form. It is freedom *within* the discipline of well-chosen words, sensory details, images, combinations of sounds within and among words, and punctuation, all of which contribute meaningfully, not haphazardly, to its existence as a poem.

Much the way chapters help organize the narrative elements of fiction, or paragraphs signal a change in the focus of an essay, the stanza breaks in a poem can also signal a shift in perception, feeling, or action. To use another analogy, the space at the ends of lines and stanzas in a poem is like a "rest" in a musical score. The "white space" created between the end of one stanza and the beginning of the next allows a measure of reverberation from the images and sounds that have gone before. Then what follows, like the various movements in a sonata or symphony, creates a contrast in mood, tone, or pace, usually while maintaining a unifying *motif,* a thread of image, feeling, or experience.

If we examine Kenyon's poem with an eye and ear toward the beginnings and ends of its stanzas, we can notice, for example, the contrast between open and closed punctuation. The first line of the first stanza is a complete sentence, and ends in a period. The sense of closure is therefore very strong, and is a perfect match to this child's sense of being closed off from the rest of the class, shut out of the relative comfort with which the other students perform "operations with numbers."

But the last line of stanza one ends in an ellipsis, an "antonym" (or opposite) to the period. An ellipsis indicates that there is more, that something is not finished, and any completions or conclusions are left unresolved or unexpressed. Kenyon's ellipses (which occur consistently throughout her work, in nearly every poem) are a kind of invitation to the reader to suspend or delay the urge to *finish* the thought or experience; instead, to court possibility. Even though "Ann understood division" is a complete sentence, Kenyon chose, paradoxically, to "punctuate" it with an ellipsis. As a result, both line and stanza reverberate with several possible meanings: perhaps Ann understands more than division; or, division itself is more than a mathematical operation; or, there is no end to division in this world. The ellipsis is a form of punctuation that engages the reader more intensely in the poem and its possibilities.

Besides its collaboration with mystery and in-completion, the ellipses in this poem heighten the contrast with whatever comes next. And what comes next, in stanza two, is the opposite of a child's dreamy meditation on her classmate's blue bookmark and "bright cheeks." It is the sudden, vehement response from the stony cold (read "monumental") Miss Moran who has studied neither the particulars of this child's behavior, nor her need as a student. The stanza ends, fittingly enough, with another

complete sentence, ending in a period: "The door swung briskly shut." In this way, the stanza is punctuated in accord with Miss Moran's brand of authority: judgmental, conclusive, unilateral. Even the word "shut" ends in a hard, closed, "t" sound. What reverberates in the musical "rest" between stanza two and three is the tuneless, muted slam of involuntary confinement, of being shut off, physically, in parallel to being shut away, mentally, from the rest of the class.

The third stanza opens with a line that is not punctuated, but which continues into the next line. Such a technique is called *enjambment.* An enjambed line creates a sense of fluidity and incompletion. In this poem it offers a contrast with the cold, decisive action and sound that has gone before. The flexibility of the enjambed line is in accord with the flexible strength of this child and her refusal to be daunted by punishment. Instead, she takes comfort where and how she can, changing a bucket into a chair, humming her way into a new "place" in relation to Miss Moran in particular, and authority in general.

The last two lines of the poem are also enjambed, and even though there is no hard stop at the end of such a line, the "white space" created between one line and the next allows a natural pause or breath. It also puts a slight emphasis both on the last word of line 24, "blinking," and the first phrase of line 25, "and changed." The entire poem concludes with the child having been led "back to class," and the sentence ends in the way we expect most poems to end, in a period. However, since the poem has created other options for closure, such as the ellipsis, this period assumes more than a mechanical responsibility. Periods and ellipses in many Kenyon poems often bear a stronger-than-ordinary burden of meaning. "Reading" the period in this way, we can accordingly interpret the paradox of the child returning, but changed, as a decisive moment in her life.

Historical Context

Jane Kenyon was an elementary school student in the mid-1950s. InUnited States educational history, these years were characterized by "Cold War" anxiety. "Cold War" is the term used to describe the antagonistic relations between the Soviet Union and theUnited States after World War II, when political and economic struggles mounted between capitalist, democratic nations and those under communist control. While both sides built up massive military power, there was no actual military combat, hence the term "cold." In 1957, theSoviet Union launched the world's first manmade satellite, Sputnik I. TheU.S. responded to this event with some alarm, and intensified the emphasis on math and science in schools in order to give the country a competitive edge in this new dimension of the Cold War, the space race. Both rural and urban schools nationwide responded as they could to this new national "crisis." Those having "trouble with math" were a liability in the wake of accelerated pressure to do well in the subjects that would help theU.S. win the race against Sputnik and communism.

Cold War anxiety was not the only influence on the character of education in the 1950s, however. The decade was also marked by a kind of cultural conservatism that seemed to interpret the ideal democracy as dutiful and conforming, not critically engaged and diverse. Most public schools shaped their students accordingly.

Numerous advances made earlier in the century by John Dewey and proponents of "progressive education" diminished in the face of these cultural forces. Dewey's ideas opposed educational elitism and upheld notions of individual giftedness.

He didn't believe that a few students (usually from upper-class families) should receive an academic education, and the rest be assigned to vocational training. Nor did he believe that the curriculum should begin and end with the "3 R's"□"reading, writing, and 'rithmetic," but that the emotional, artistic, and creative potential in children also requires attention. Thus, music, drama, and art are intrinsic to the curricula of that broad spectrum of schools called "progressive." In so-called "traditional" schools, the arts are usually considered "specials" or "extras" and their funding is often the first to go in a budget cut.

Opponents of progressive education in the fifties, such as University of Chicago historian Arthur Bestor, called it "regressive education" on the grounds that "instead of advancing, it began to undermine the great traditions of liberal education and to substitute for them lesser aims, confused aims, or no aims at all" *{Education Week).* The controversial Navy admiral Hyman Rickover, who directed the construction and launching of the first atomic-powered submarine, spoke out stridently against progressive education in *Education and Freedom* (1959):

Dewey's insistence on making the child's interest the determining factor in planning curricula has led to substitution of know-how subjects for solid learning __ Our young people are therefore deprived of the tremendous intellectual heritage of Western

civilization which no child can possibly discover by himself; he must be led to it. *(Education Week)*

A new generation of "progressives" entered the educational forum in the 1960s. Among them was social critic Jonathan Kozol, whose telling title *Death at An Early Age* (1967) spared no one his scathingly honest examination of schools as "a crazy place to learn." John Holt, "grandfather" of the unschooling movement and author of such books as *How Children Fail* (1964) seems to have been a witness of the drama in Kenyon's one-room school when he suggests that for such children, school for them is a kind of jail.

Do they not, to some extent, escape and frustrate the relentless, insatiable pressure of their elders by withdrawing the most intelligent and creative parts of their minds from the scene? Is this not at least a partial explanation of the extraordinary stupidity that otherwise bright children so often show in school? The stubborn and dogged "I don't get it" with which they meet the instructions and explanations of their teachers□may it not be a statement of resistance as well as one of panic and flight *(Education Week)?*

The vignette of the classroom in "Trouble with Math" seems cut from the template of a typical 1950s school. As such, it would provide little room, so to speak, for an imagination as expansive, and a temperament as artistic as that of Jane Kenyon.

Critical Overview

By most accounts, Jane Kenyon was flourishing as a poet when she died from leukemia, barely 48 years old. She had written four volumes of poems, and showed no signs of flagging in her work, despite husband Donald Hall's struggle with cancer and her own relentless bouts with depression. Her poetry was recognized both locally and nationally: she was honored with several awards; was named Poet Laureate of New Hampshire; received several fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts; and her poems appeared frequently in the annual series *The Best American Poetry.*

Many readers use words such as "accessible," "earnest," "contemplative," "spare," "reticent," and "full of common things" to describe the character of Kenyon's work. Scott Hightower of the *Library Journal* finds her writing "devoid of urbane ironies," and even though he was speaking specifically about her prose in *A Hundred White Daffodils,* the same is also true of her poems. That may be why her art does not easily yield to the strategies and language of most "schools" of literary criticism. In the *New Criterion,* Robert Richman recognizes that Kenyon "refuses to be tempted to any form of poetic cliche," and that in this "age of the pigeonhole," Kenyon shows a strong "resistance to easy categorization." Thus, there is relatively little criticism of Kenyon's work beyond book reviews, and no specific attention to "Trouble with Math in aOne-Room Country School."

Kenyon's detractors are few, but their criticisms are consistent: her language is too simple, her concerns too enclosed. As Robin Latimer points out, Kenyon was criticized negatively after her second book for a pattern of "failing to flirt excess," and for keeping her subject matter too closely tethered to the boundaries of her daily routines and chores. Latimer herself finds that "dog-walking is alarmingly recurrent" in the sixty poems comprising *Let Evening Come* (1990), but concedes that "this simple image of coping" may be affirming for some readers. David Barber counters such criticism by arguing that Kenyon's "modesty of means is not the same thing of course as simplicity of apprehension"; that is, her images may partake of the mundane, but the weight of feeling and depth of attention they reveal is profound.

Kenyon selected "Trouble with Math in aOne-Room Country School" to appear in *Otherwise,* the collection of poems published after her death. Because there was so much regret for her passing by fellow poets and readers alike, *Otherwise* received more attention than any volume before it. In his review of the posthumous volume, Robert Richman calls her death "a significant loss to American poetry." Paul Breslin concludes that "a significant expansion in Kenyon's range had just begun when her last illness cut it short." His essay review for *Poetry* observes the opening of Kenyon's gift from what he perceives as an early tendency to be somewhat closeted and "self-limited," to her later pieces which move away from private concerns into more "public" themes. Elizabeth Lund, writing for the *Christian Science Monitor,* suggests **that reading** *Otherwise* is a strong remedy for the feeling that contemporary poetry is "little more than a wasteland." "That's why it's important for aspiring writers□or any true poetry fan" to become familiar with poets like Jane Kenyon, saysLund. In her review **of** *Otherwise* **for**

the *Women's Review of Books,* Adrian Oktenberg says, "When I think of her I think less often of other poets than of the modern artists of spirituality ... who pursue an ideal of perfection with every fiber." By the end of her life, Kenyon had obviously traveled quite a distance from the childhood closets of religious and academic fear to a landscape that could liberate both an affirmative spirituality and her art.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Alice Van Wart is a writer and teaches literature and writing in the Department of Continuing Education at theUniversity of Toronto. She has published two books of poetry and has written articles on modern and contemporary literature. In the following essay, Van Wart examines the sensitivity and intellect of the poet expressed in the poem.

Born in 1947, Kenyon's life was cut short by cancer in 1995. Throughout much of her life she suffered the crippling effects of a clinical depression, the shadow of which hovers over much of her poetry and accounts for a consistent theme in it: the redemption of suffering through an appreciation of beauty in the world of art and music and, most particularly, in the natural world. In a poem titled "Having It Out With Melancholy," Kenyon, experiencing a moment of intense happiness at her awareness of the beauty in life, rhetorically asks, "What hurt me so terribly / All my life until this moment?" Undoubtedly there is no one answer to this question, but in her poem "Trouble With Math in aOne-Room Country School," there is the suggestion of the poet's acute sensitivity and a suble intellect, qualities that will set the poet apart at an early age.

Kenyon's poem "Trouble With Math in a One-Room Country School," first published in *The Boat of Quiet Hours,* is typical of much of Kenyon's poetry in that it conveys complex feeling and emotional clarity through deceptive simplicity of form and diction. Yet despite its surface acessibility the poem dramatizes a complex transformative moment in the poet's life to evoke the process of thought and shifting emotions. The poem is autobiographical, based on an incident that occurred when she attended a one-room country schoolhouse between the grades of one to four. In the poem the poet recalls a particular incident from childhood that changed her fundamentally. The incident occurred when she innocently asked another student, her neighbor Ann, to explain division, a concept the teacher had been teaching, but which she had not grasped. The teacher expelled the young Kenyon from the class for talking and punished her by putting her in the furnace closet. If the teacher's intention in her punishment was to embarrass her young student and make her respect authority, the teacher badly miscalculated. Far from breaking down and becoming repentant for her action, the young Kenyon remained angry at the teacher's actions and "hardened" her heart "against authority."

Though the young girl may not have been aware of the true significance of the event at the time, the adult knows it was at that moment that something "changed" within her. The poem, written from the first-person point of view in three stanzas of free verse, is also an initiation poem. In the first stanza the poet describes the incident; in the second she shows the teacher's response to it; and in the third she shows the lasting response to her punishment. Kenyon crafts her poem using structure and diction in such a way that she recreates the perspective of childhood through the unwavering voice of an adult. This dual perspective works to show both the progression of the thought and the emotions of the girl from the moment she is caught asking for help to the moment she

walks back into the classroom, and the thoughts and feelings of the adult as she looks back on the event, interpreting and finding in it significant meaning.

The poem begins *in medias res.* The students are assembled in class and told to work on a mathematics exercise. While the other students "bent their heads and started in," the poet remains "confused" about what she should be doing and asks her "neighbor / to explain." The poet remembers Ann, as "a sturdy, bright cheeked girl / who brought raw milk to school from her family's herd ofHolsteins." Remembering Ann reminds the poet that "Ann had a blue bookmark." The reason she remembers the bookmark is because on it was a picture of Christ, which "revealed his beating heart, / holding the flesh back with His wounded hand." Clearly the description of Ann as "a sturdy, bright-cheeked girl" is the adult's and the image of Christ is one that has stayed in the poet's mind.

The abrupt shift from the image on the bookmark to the cryptic last line of "Ann understood division" is initially startling, but the poet is making an associative connection between the image and the meaning of division, which will be fully clarified in the final stanza. The poet understands something about Ann's nature that the child would not have comprehended. In the context of the preceding lines of the first stanza that contain the image of Ann as a sturdy farm girl and the wounds of Christ, the line carries complex association. First, the young poet asked Ann to help her because Ann understood "division," which the young poet did not. Second, the adult sees there was already in Ann a division or separation between her identity as a girl who brings raw milk from her family's farm to school and a smart student capable of understanding the mathematics of division.

In the second stanza the poet recalls the teacher's response as the teacher "sprang from her monumental desk" and led the young poet "roughly" out of the class. The poet's description clearly shows the child's perspective of the event. The teacher's reactions are imbued with a sense of force and anger as she "propelled" the young poet to the furnace closet, where the door "swung briskly shut." At the same time the poet conveys her feelings that the teacher's punishment was extreme, if not unfair, at least in accordance with the action that provoked it. Recalling the incident, the poet states how she felt at that moment; her shame, she says, "was radical." The poet's sense of shame suggests her own painful awareness of being guilty, as well as feeling disgraced in front of her schoolmates. The use of the word "radical" to describe her shame conveys the extent of her feelings and suggests other far-reaching consequences. The poet makes clear that part of her shame comes from being singled out as the first girl to be put into the furnace room for punishment. Previously, the poet explains, "only the boys" were put there, and, moreover, only "the older ones at that." By being placed in the furnace closet where "only the boys have gone before, the young poet felt singled out and isolated."

Ann may have understood something about the mathematics of "division," but the adult poet realizes it was at this point that she began to understand the meaning of division in another sense. In the final stanza the poet remembers her feelings in the closet. Compared to the previous fear and shame she had experienced before the door "swung briskly shut," the young poet finds herself "soothed." The transition between the girl's

response to her teacher in the second stanza and her response to being locked in the closet in the third stanza is unexpected. Rather than experiencing fear of the darkness or self-pity at her shame, the young poet finds "the warmth, the gloom, the smell / of sweeping compound clinging to the broom" calming and relieving. She finds herself a bucket on which to sit and begins drumming on her knees "a theme from Haydn" that she knew from her "piano lessons."

Now remembering this moment the poet realizes that during this time that something else occurred: that she "hardened" her "heart against authority." The poet's uses of the active rather than passive voice to describe her reaction suggests volition on her part; her hardened heart was not something that happened unconsciously but something she herself determined. The double use of the compound coordinating conjunction "and" in lines 20 and 22 shows the simultaneous occurrence of the young poet hardening her heart against authority and the teacher's return to the closet. The young poet hears the teacher's "steps, her fingers / on the latch," before she opens the door to lead her student "blinking / and changed, back to the class." During her time behind the closed door the young poet is not only isolated from the others in her class, but she is also aware of the indignity of her situation and experiences a sense of injustice. She understands the power the teacher has over her to compel obedience and inflict pain.

As an adult the poet is aware that when she returned with the teacher to the classroom she is "blinking" not just because her eyes are adjusting to the light, but because she sees the classroom in a new light. The poet experiences her first awareness of the hierarchical nature of authority and its power to dole out punishment, just or unjust. At that moment she sees the division authority engenders between those who have power and those who don't in the division between teachers and students and between boys and girls. Further, the poet's hardened heart recalls the image on Ann's bookmark of Christ's open and "beating heart." The "wounded hand" with which Christ holds back the flesh of his heart is in Christian terms a symbol of his forgiveness in the face of his betrayal and crucifixion. The poet, however, unlike Christ, has hardened her heart in the face of her punishment. The change that has come about as a result of her experience in the furnace closet rests in her future inability to accept or forgive the ruthlessness of authority. At the moment the young poet walked back into the classroom she is unconsciously aware that she has been singled out and set apart; she has become an outsider, a condition that she continues to feel as an adult.

The final stanza expands and clarifies the real meaning of the "division" in the last line of the first stanza. The tone of the poem resonates with the anger of the young girl, still felt by the adult poet as she recalls the incident. Although the locus of the shame and the sense of isolation resides initially within the incident itself, the poet's use of a dual perspective, the association of the images between the first and third stanza, and her use of diction convey both a sense of the complexity of her feelings as a child and the clarity of her emotions as she recalls the incident and understands its significance. In this respect Kenyon's understanding of the incident is one of a loss of innocence. The feelings of shame she experienced have not been mitigated with time, but her understanding of herself has sharpened in her recollection of a seminal event in her life.

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

Critical Essay #2

Aviya Kushner is the Contributing Editor in Poetry at BarnesandNoble.com *and the Poetry Editor* o/Neworld Magazine. *She is a graduate of the acclaimed creative writing program in poetry atBoston University, where she received the Fitzgerald Award in Translation. Her writing on poetry has appeared in* Harvard Review *and* The Boston Phoenix, *and she has served as Poetry Coordinator for* AGNI Magazine. *She has given readings of her own work throughout the United States, and she teaches at Massachusetts Communications College inBoston. In the following essay, Kushner discusses the factors, such as dialogue and action, that make this poem untypical ofKenyon 's style.*

Jane Kenyon is generally a poet of quiet moments, a woman who writes of walks alone with the dog in winter, who details scrubbing floorboards and finding a long gray hair among them. Her poems rarely contain overt action and instead focus on thought□a subdued but firm revelation.

A classic example of a Kenyon thought poem is "The Suitor," which begins with a couple peacefully sleeping back to back as the wind rushes through a nearby tree. Then the poem veers:

Suddenly I understand that I am happy / For months this feeling / has been coming closer, stopping / for short visits, like a timid suitor.

Like many Kenyon poems, there is no dialogue in "The Suitor." There is also no loud crashing action, which reflects the poet's daily routine of writing. Kenyon spent most of her life living in the New Hampshire countryside with her husband, the well-known poet Donald Hall. Many of her poems are about the natural landscape and her own domestic landscape as a bride in the Hall ancestral home and a younger poet married to an older, famous writer. In both her newspaper columns and her poetry, topics like a grandmother's tablecloth, daffodils, and the kindness of nearby neighbors repeat.

But Kenyon wasn't always the wife of Hall or a resident of the Hall home. She was not always a newcomer to aNew England town. In "Trouble With Math in a One-Room Schoolhouse," she details the cold farm country she came from□where she lived as a little girl. The poem differs from standard Kenyon fare in more than just its location. Unlike those quiet, thought-filled poems which take place internally, it contains both dialogue and action, and it consciously tries to tell a story. But in the poem's head-on discussion of country morals, shame, knowledge, and God, clues to the Kenyon of serene lyric poems are to be found.

The title is long for Kenyon, and unusually direct. The poem will clearly take place in the country and in a schoolhouse, and the word "trouble" signals that problems lie ahead. But that's where the simple narrative ends and the twists begin.

The first line starts off on a confusing note. "The others bent their heads and started in." Which others? Starting in on what? The next line begins with a reflection of what the reader is probably thinking. "Confused, I asked my neighbor / to explain."

Through this inclusive opening sequence, Kenyon brings the reader into what otherwise might be a personal anecdote. The speaker is as lost as the reader is. The speaker then describes her neighbor, a bright-cheeked farm girl who brought raw milk to school from her family's herd of Hol-steins. Ann's distinguishing feature is her blue bookmark, which had a very graphic description of Jesus Christ. In fact, on that blue bookmark, "Christ revealed his beating heart, holding the flesh back with his wounded hand."

Kenyon often referred to religion in her writing, especially her hesitancy in attending her husband's church and later, her joy in it. Here, the speaker comments simply: "Ann understood division." Division in this case can mean not just math, but the divisions of Christ's heart and his flesh. It can also be a humorous comment on the division between those who know and those who don't know math.

After this graphic and rather bloody description□very rare for the graceful Kenyon□the second stanza begins with a proper noun, which is also an unusual move for this poet. As for action, it's a big leap from the quiet request to a neighbor for some help with math. In fact, the stanza springs with movement:

Miss Moran sprang from her monumental desk And led me roughly through the class without a word.

The speaker is about to be punished, and she knows it. The alliteration of "m" helps create that sense of knowing helplessness. Miss Moran appears so mad that she is actually speechless. In an effort to match that horror, the speaker uses an odd adjective to describe her own embarrassment. Her "shame was radical / as she propelled me past the cloakroom to the furnace room ..."

Kenyon uses internal rhyme to give the poem its own music. "Monumental," "radical," and "propelled" have similar endings, as do "put" and "shut." The clipped tone of "the door swung briskly shut" is followed by long, comma-filled descriptive lines.

The warmth, the gloom, the smell

Of sweeping compound clinging to the broom

soothed me.

Here again, Kenyon uses like sounds□ "gloom," "broom," and "soothed," repeating the "oo." In the furnace closet, the speaker finds a bucket and turns it upside-down so she can sit on it. She tries to hum a little, and "hardens her heart" against authority, using the Biblical phrase from Pharaoh's reactions to the Jewish slaves' cries.

"She led me, blinking / and changed, back to the class." After that spell in the hot, dark closet, the speaker blinks from the light. She has changed, though she doesn't specify

how. It seems likely that authority is what the speaker has grown to despise. Even in a space as small as a one-room school, there are the powerful and the powerless. The speaker would grow to write about powers we have little control over□love, depression, and death□ but this power is more disturbing, because it is simple human arrogance and desire to rule. While the healthy-looking Ann may "understand division," the speaker does not understand the need for division□between furnace-closet and classroom, between chastised students and classmates. This lack of understanding is the one connector between this poem and the rest of Kenyon's work.

As an older poet, she would later probe the subjects of understanding and lack of understanding repeatedly. She wrote of the death of a young man, and tried to understand his widow's state of mind. She wrote of the awful grip of depression, and tried to understand how it controls its victims. Of course, she also wrote numerous poems about being married and tried to understand how individual female identity is both lost and expanded within marriage's borders. In her probing, Kenyon often produced beautiful, clear poems of pure thought. What's fascinating about this fear-filled, action-packed poem is that it offers a glimpse into the headstrong girl who grew into one of our nation's most eloquent and elegant poets of the countryside.

Source: Aviya Kushner, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Adaptations

Jane Kenyon reads three poems, "Man Eating," "Gettysburg: July 1, 1863," and "Happiness," in a CD recording, *The New Hampshire Writers' Project Sampler: Ten Years of Literary Performance, 1988-1998.* The CD also features two poems by Donald Hall.

On October 26, 1995, a celebration of Jane Kenyon's life and work took place at theUniversity of New Hampshire's Dimond Library. Three New Hampshire poets, Charles Simic, McKeel McBride, and Donald Hall, read selections from Kenyon's work and gave personal accounts of their connection with Kenyon and her poetry. A videotape and audio recording of the entire reading are available for on-site use in the Special Collections department of theUniversity of New Hampshire library (phone 603-862-2714). A website for the Kenyon exhibit□www.izaak. unh.edu/specoll/exhibits/reading.htm□also makes several recorded excerpts of the celebration available online.

You can listen to Donald Hall read two Kenyon poems, "Drawing from the Past" and "Surprise," in RealAudio, at *TheAtlantic Monthly's* online site□www.theatlantic.eom/unbound//poetry/ anthology/Kenyon/2poems.htm.

A Life Together: Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon is a video recording first broadcast in December of 1993 on *Bill Moyers' Journal.* Primarily an interview of the couple in their home in Wilmot, the Moyers film also includes footage of Kenyon and Hall reading to audiences at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival and to neighbors in Wilmot. The video can be obtained from Films for the Humanities, 1-800-257-5126.

At least two composers have set the poetry of Jane Kenyon to music. J. Mark Scearce wrote a score in *1991, American Triptych: For Soprano, Flute, Clarinet/Bass Clarinet, Violin, Cello, Piano, and Percussion: On Three Poems by Jane Kenyon.* This piece features the poems "At the Store," "Down the Road," and "Let Evening Come." *Briefly It Enters* (1997) is a cycle of songs for voice and piano based on nine poems by Kenyon, composed by William Bolcom. It is published by E. B. Marks and distributed by H. Leonard, ISBN 0793591325.

Bellarmine College inLouisville, Kentucky, hosted "The First Jane Kenyon Conference," April 16-18, 1998, and has made four audio-cassette recordings of the conference readings and remembrances available.

Topics for Further Study

Design an oral history project that engages older members of your family or community in reconstructing a typical school day in their elementary school years. Focus your questions to evoke stories and vivid descriptions.

Research the history of education in your own town, city, or county in the past 50 years. How have demographic, political, or economic trends influenced the patterns of growth and change in schools? Do these mirror broader national trends? How so?

Write a thank-you letter to a teacher who has had a positive influence on your life. Include specific memories of classes or conversations or personal encouragement. Send it if you wish.

Many powerful writings have emerged from enforced confinement in a concentration camp, prison, hospital room, or even a "furnace closet" at school. Sometimes enforced isolation can lead to transformation, through imaginative thinking, reflection, or decisions. Write a poem or story, serious or comic, in which your own experience of confinement led to change.

Compare and Contrast

1847: Lyman Cobb's *The Evil Tendencies of Corporal Punishment as a Means of Moral Discipline in Families and Schools* was published. The book argues against the practice of flogging as an educational practice. Cobb was also opposed to requiring students to do tedious reading.

1899: The publication of John Dewey's *The School and Society* ignited a revolution in the theory and practice of American education.

1923: The Iron Hill School, a one-room school, was constructed in rural Delaware for African-American children as part of philanthropist Pierre du Pont's "Delaware experiment." Even though the school was small, it incorporated many concepts and practices of progressive education.

1975: The U. S. Supreme Court rules that teachers are permitted to spank students if the students are made aware in advance of the behavior that warrants such an action.

1989: According to the Educational Testing Service, American students (age 13) rank last in math and science among students of the same age from South Korea, Great Britain, Ireland, Spain, and Canada.

1997: The U. S. Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution does not prohibit school districts from sending teachers into religious schools to provide remedial services to needy students.

1946: The Leukemia Research Foundation was founded inChicago.

1975: The five-year survival rate for adult patients with acute leukemia was 38%; for children, 53%.

1988: The five-year survival rate for patients with acute leukemia improved to 55% in adults and 78% in children.

1999: Over 22,000 adults and children in theUnited States died from leukemia.

Today: A new experimental therapy involving the injection of an immunotoxin known as LMB-2 is found to be useful in treating the rare blood cancer known as HCL (hairy cell leukemia).

What Do I Read Next?

Donald Hall's *Without: Poems* appeared in 1998, three years after Jane Kenyon's death. The book's title refers to life "without" his wife. It is a sequence of elegiac poems that chronicle Kenyon's diagnosis, illness, and death, even while it gives a glimpse into the unusual marriage of two artists. Most importantly, perhaps, it tells the story of a profound grief. *Without* finds a prose parallel in *A Grief Observed* by British writer C. S. Lewis, who lost his wife, Joy Davidman, to cancer. The film version of Lewis's book, *Shadowlands* became a popular success in the mid-1990's.

Just as *Without* poetically narrates the end of Kenyon and Hall's life together, Kenyon's first book of poems, *From Room to Room* (1978) relates the early years of their marriage as she tries to settle into Hall's family home in Wilmot, New Hampshire. Kenyon first wanders "from room to room" rather disembodied, musing over the artifacts of Hall's ancestors□a thimble, a long gray hair, a rusting cast-iron stove□until by the end of the book, in a poem about a church potluck, she has somehow "found myself among people trying to live ordered lives." The images in the book gradually change from rootlessness to a sense of belonging that frees her to look around with a different, more expansive perception, revealed in the last poem "Now That We Live."

Feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar are co-editors of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (2nd ed. 1996), avast survey of women's writing that begins with Julian of Norwich in the Middle Ages and concludes with contemporary writers such as Alice Walker and Lucille Clifton. Both British and American women are represented in this collection of prose, fiction, and poetry. In creating the anthology, Gilbert and Gubar attempted to "recover a long and often neglected literary history," and trace the dynamic contours of the tradition of women's writing in English.

When Donald Hall returned to New Hampshire with Jane Kenyon, he said in *Here at Eagle Pond* (1990) that "for me, it was coining home, and it was coming home to the place of language." Eagle Pond was where Hall began to write poems at age eleven or twelve. In this book, illustrated by Thomas Nason, Hall supplies good reasons, often humorous, for "why we live here." Among other things, he discusses New Hampshire's "one thousand" seasons, why he hates Vermont, and why he loves the Red Sox and his satellite dish.

Further Study

Kenyon, Jane, *A Hundred White Daffodils,* Graywolf Press,1999.

Beyond those who read her columns in *TheConcord Monitor (Hew* Hampshire), few were acquainted with Jane Kenyon the prose writer. *A Hundred White Daffodils* brings this dimension of her work to light with a collection of columns, miscellaneous prose pieces, transcripts of interviews, a handful of aesthetic statements, and her translations of the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. The volume is introduced by Donald Hall, and concludes with Jack Kelleher's thorough bibliography of works by and about Kenyon, as well as audio and video recordings, and musical scores based on her poems.

Kenyon, Jane, *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems,* Graywolf Press, 1996.

In the weeks before her death, Kenyon selected poems from her four previous volumes and from among her new pieces to appear in this collection. The afterword by Donald Hall provides a brief portrait of his wife, her last days, and her last poem, "The Sick Wife."

Holden, Jonathan, "American Poetry: 1970-1990," *A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry,* ed. Jack Myers and David Wojahn, Southern Illinois University Press, 1991, pp. 254-274.

Even though Jane Kenyon is not mentioned in this brief survey of American poetry from 1970-1990, it is helpful for reading her work (or that of any other contemporary poet) in this broader context. Holden explains clearly the various trends affecting and affected by American poetry, with a focus on the charge that poetry has become an "industry" at the expense of art.

One of the best ways to keep up with the trends in American poetry is to become acquainted with the series called *The Best American Poetry,* published annually since 1988. Each year's anthology is edited and introduced by a different poet, such as John Ashbery, Donald Hall, Jorie Graham, and Charles Simic, among others. Only one poem per poet is published in the anthology, thus allowing for an expansive range of well-known and emerging writers. The editors' introductions themselves reveal much about the state of poetry inAmerica, and can be read as a kind of "weather report" of changes in and predictions for the art. David Lehman, editor of the series, says in the foreword to the 1995 volume, "Modern American poetry is a cultural glory on the level of jazz and abstract expressionism. It is constantly renewing and refreshing itself...."

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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.

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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

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