Three Times My Life Has Opened Study Guide

Three Times My Life Has Opened by Jane Hirshfield

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Contents

Introduction

Jane Hirshfield opted to place "Three Times My Life Has Opened" as the last poem in her 1997 collection called *The Lives of the Heart*, and it makes for an appropriate and intriguing closing thought. This poem is rich in metaphor and mystery, and one line probably epitomizes the latter better than any other: "You will recognize what I am saying or you will not." This is the essence of a poem that is presented with an elegant tone, a simple style, and a caring voice that seems to assure the reader that one does not necessarily need to grasp every meaning within it to be moved by it. Instead, the overall gist of this work is most easily comprehended by getting a *feel* for its content without worrying about deciphering a certain message.

The word "Zen" is not mentioned in "Three Times My Life Has Opened," nor is "koan" (an unsolvable, thought-provoking riddle), "zazen," (the act of serious meditating), or "satori" (the attainment of spiritual enlightenment and true peace of mind). Yet the *presence* of these things can be felt within the poem, even though the words themselves are absent. To explain, then, what this poem is about is first to recognize the mystery to which few may be privy and to view it more as a whole than as the sum of its parts. The parts, after all, tend to elude specific definition or reference, but the work in its entirety reflects a philosophy in which ultimate achievement is more about connecting the inner-self to the natural world than to espousing intellectual rhetoric or theory. In short, this poem addresses a spiritual awakening, metaphorically compared to the movement of autumn through winter and into spring.

Author Biography

Jane Hirshfield was born in New York City in 1953. Her father was a clothing manufacturer and her mother was a secretary. Even as a young child, she knew she wanted to be a writer and poet when she grew up and recalls writing a sentence to that effect when prompted by a grade school teacher asking the children about future careers. The first book she bought for herself at age nine was a collection of haiku poetry, evidence of not only her early interest in that genre but also in Japanese writing and culture. Hirshfield graduated from a girls' school in New York and then went on to Princeton from which she graduated magna cum laude in 1973. Also in 1973, she published her first poem, but, in an unlikely move, she put aside her writing for the next eight years to study at the San Francisco Zen Center.

Hirshfield has said that the years she dedicated exclusively to learning and practicing Zen Buddhism have had the most significant influence on everything she has done since□from writing and teaching to her quiet, loving enjoyment of gardening and horses. But the religion of Zen rarely manifests itself in any direct way in Hirshfield's poetry. She does not use Zen language or make overt Zen references, and yet her writing is unmistakably radiant of the introspective, peaceful, and attentive thought that makes up Zen philosophy. After leaving the center in San Francisco in the early 1980s, Hirshfield began to write and teach, and her work began earning awards. Over the past two decades, she has received poetry prizes from several journal competitions, as well as a Pushcart Prize. She was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1985, an Achievement Grant from the Marin Arts Council in 1990, and the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award in 1995. Most of her teaching positions have been at universities and workshops in California, and she has made that state her permanent residence.

The Lives of the Heart, which includes the poem "Three Times My Life Has Opened," was Hirshfield's fourth book of poems, published in 1997. A prolific essayist and translator, as well as poet, Hirshfield simultaneously published a collection of essays titled *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* in 1997. She has translated the poems of various Japanese poets, most notably the love poems of Ono no Komachi and Izumi Shikubu. Her most recent poetry collection, *Given Sugar, Given Salt*, was published in 2001.

Poem Text

Three times my life has opened.
Once, into darkness and rain.
Once, into what the body carries at all times within it and starts
to remember each time it enters the act of love.
Once, to the fire that holds all.
These three were not different.
You will recognize what I am saying or you will not.
But outside my window all day a maple has stepped from her leaves
like a woman in love with winter, dropping the colored silks.
Neither are we different in what we know.
There is a door. It opens. Then it is closed. But a slip of light
stays, like a scrap of unreadable paper left on the floor,
or the one red leaf the snow releases in March.

Plot Summary

Line 1

The first line of "Three Times My Life Has Opened" is, obviously, a repetition of the title. But a reader should never be too quick to judge which came first. Perhaps after the poem was written, Hirshfield decided just to call it by its first line. The order makes no difference in interpreting the poem, for this line begs two questions, regardless of how the work got its name: what does the poet mean when she says her life has "opened," and what or when are the "three times" that it happened?

Line 2

The second line of the poem sets the precedent for the poet's description of the times she claims her life has opened. She does not reveal *when* the events occur, but rather what the circumstances are that surround each one□more like *where* it happens than when. Line 2 implies a sad or desolate time, one in which the poet's life experiences "darkness and rain." Keep in mind that the word "opened" indicates a willingness to receive something. The connotation would have been much different if Hirshfield had said her life fell into, or was forced into, certain situations. Therefore, even though darkness and rain do not seem like anything she would want to welcome into her life, one must wait to see how this episode plays out with the next two openings before reaching that conclusion.

Lines 3-4

These lines describe the second time the poet's life opened, and it seems to reveal a better time than the first. A specific meaning may not be any clearer here, but mentioning "the act of love" implies a moment of contentment, if not blissfulness. The allusion in these lines is to something physical, or natural, for "what the body carries within it" may be water or blood or any other liquid or solid that makes up the human body. But these items do not sound very poetic or like something the body "starts to remember" because the physical makeup of it is not likely to be forgotten. So what the body contains and recalls is open to speculation. Perhaps this second event is a bridge between the dreary darkness of the previous one and the warm brightness of the one to come. Regardless of the specifics, the poet effectively creates a tie-in for the physical being to the physicality of nature described at the end of the work.

Line 5

The third and final opening is "to the fire that holds all," and, again, this image could have either positive or negative connotations. The first inclination may be to imagine something horrific, as opening one's life to flames and burning sounds terribly painful, if

not deadly. But fire is also a metaphor for passion and warmth, as well as for mental alertness and enlightenment. Since this fire "holds all," the positive connotation appears to be the most likely intended.

Lines 6-7

These lines are two of the most concrete in the poem, and yet they reveal the core of the poet's message. Although the three events surrounding her life's opening seem to be strikingly different in content□from darkness and rain to lovemaking to fire□Hirshfield claims, "These three were not different." If the reader finds this puzzling, not to worry, for the poet admits, "You will recognize what I am saying or you will not." That may take the reader off the hook, but it does something more as well. In her article "Poetry and the Mind of Indirection," from her book *Nine Gates*, Hirshfield asks, "Why do circuitousness and indirection play so great a role in poetic thought?" The answer she provides is that "only when looked at from a place of asideness and exile does the life of the world step fully forward." So looking at something head-on or trying to analyze something in a straightforward manner usually proves futile. If the reader does not "recognize" what the poet is saying, it is only because he or she wants to bring direction to what is unashamedly indirect.

Lines 8-9

Whereas the previous two lines may be the most lacking in visual imagery, these two virtually bask in it. The setting is late autumn when the bright, colorful leaves of a maple tree are dropping rapidly, foreshadowing the onset of winter. The tree seems to be eager for the new season, for it acts "like a woman in love with winter," who readily disrobes in anticipation of the pleasure it will bring. The sensuousness of these lines draws the reader back to lines 3 and 4, in which the human body and the "act of love" are also the prevalent images. Lines 8 and 9 juxtaposed against lines 6 and 7 make for a stunning contrast between the abstract and the concrete. They seem to imply that no matter what intellectual musings one may entertain, everything always comes back to the visible and the tangible.

Line 10

The "we" in this line refers to the poet and the reader, just as the "You" in line 7 is a direct address to the reader. Line 10 reflects a sentiment similar to that in line 6, but now there is no difference "in what we know." The word "Neither" is a direct reference back to line 6, for the two could easily be put together to read: "These three were not different, neither are we different in what we know." Hirshfield is adamant in assuring the reader of an overall human *sameness*, even though some people appear to have a greater understanding and a knack for unraveling the mysteries of the human mind.

Lines 11-12

These lines present a bit of their own mystery with the somewhat cryptic, somber description of a door simply existing, then opening, and then closing. Perhaps the door is like life, sometimes opening to various experiences and other times closed up, not showing what is going on inside. But, here, a "slip of light / stays" even after the door closes, implying a defiance of total darkness and unenlightenment. The bit of light shining on the floor is "like a scrap of unreadable paper" lying there, the key word being "unreadable." The one who sees it may not be able to understand what it says, but its *presence* signifies the triumph of light over darkness, comprehension over obscurity.

Line 13

The final line of the poem continues the idea presented in lines 11 and 12, and it also returns to the rich imagery of lines 8 and 9. The slip of light that is compared to a scrap of paper is now compared to "one red leaf" from the maple tree mentioned earlier, which manages to survive winter with its color intact. Come spring, the snow melts and "releases" the leaf, and its presence, like the light that remains, implies the same triumph.

Themes

Awareness and Compassion

Awareness and compassion are themes likely derived from Hirshfield's study of Zen Buddhism, although the connection is invisible in her work. She has noted several times over the years that she does not wish to be labeled a "Zen poet," but readily acknowledges that the components of the religion have become organic to her poetry, her philosophy, and her lifestyle. In "Three Times My Life Has Opened," Hirshfield is keenly aware of her own being and of her relationship to the natural world as a human and, more specifically, as a woman. This self-awareness also makes her attentive to and compassionate toward other beings□in this case, the reader.

Being aware of what goes on in one's life may seem like a given. But most people who can report the facts of life experiences neglect to take the obvious a step further□a step into deeper understanding of not only what has happened but what it all means. Hirshfield's examination of the times her life "opened," as she calls it, includes a metaphorical analysis of where each event falls within the big picture of existence in general. She accepts the periods of "darkness and rain" that each human being inevitably goes through, and she makes no difference between these more dismal episodes and the better times of letting the body have its own pleasures and of the passion and enlightenment of "the fire that holds all." Her acute sense of *knowing* these experiences is as important as the experiences themselves. Her decision to put them into perspective with imagery that encompasses both the natural world (a maple leaf and the winter season) and philosophical intrigue (an anonymous door opening and closing) speaks of the vitality of each in creating a *wholeness*. The poet is not selfish with her awareness, for she brings readers directly into her thoughts and offers assurance, compassion, and understanding for each.

Despite the ambiguity and mystery of the first half of the poem, there are two lines in the second half that make the confusion take a back seat to a higher purpose. Hirshfield shows both respect for and understanding of a reader's naiveté in lines 7 and 10. She acknowledges that not all people can have the exact same knowledge, but she does not claim that any individual is the better or worse for it. Instead, her declaration that "You will recognize what I am saying or you will not" infers an acceptance of each person's own experiences and says, essentially, *It is ok if you do not get any of the specifics of my message because we are still the same in our efforts and our abilities*.

Transition

"Three Times My Life Has Opened" is a poem of movement, both figuratively and literally. The openings Hirshfield describes are actually periods of transition, and they are natural and healthy even when the moments seem less than desirable. The poet's point is that personal growth comes about through change□change that is sometimes

pleasurable, sometimes challenging, but always more beneficial than stagnation. She represents her life's transitions figuratively with the natural elements of darkness, rain, and fire, as well as with a relationship between the body and mind, the physical taking on the mental act of remembering. In the second half of the poem, she likens the changes to the literal movements of maple leaves falling from a tree, silks falling from a woman's body, and the opening and closing of a door. In the final line, in which "one red leaf" is released by the snow in March, the implication is that sometimes transition is circular, just like the seasons of the year revolving one after the other in a continuous cycle. Hirshfield addresses the cyclical motion of transition in her essay "The Myriad Leaves of Words," from *Nine Gates*, in relating a koan, or riddle, to analyze a haiku by seventeenthcentury Japanese poet Basho: "'All things return to the One,' a Zen koan states, then asks, 'What does the One return to?' The answer is not to be found in the conceptual mind, yet it swims through this poem like a speckled trout through a stream." The same may be said for Hirshfield's own poem, for, while the forward motion and the circular motion are clearly exposed in "Three Times My Life Has Opened," the destination, or the answer, is unclear, at best, and, perhaps, not to be found.

Style

Hirshfield writes in contemporary free verse, creating poems out of lines that may be easily read as prose sentences as well as verse. Although the style of "Three Times My Life Has Opened" does not involve any traditional pattern of meter or rhyme, it does include striking imagery and carefully placed pauses that give it an effective poetic *feel*. Some of the images are cloaked in enigmatic references that may defy complete understanding but still conjure mental pictures and intrigue the imagination. Ten readers may see ten different images when they consider a life opening "into darkness and rain" or into "the fire that holds all," but, undoubtedly, all ten experience vivid images. Hirshfield also uses very concrete descriptions of a maple tree toward the end of autumn when most of the leaves have fallen or are falling rapidly as winter approaches. This time ten different readers would likely have similar mental images, since the scene is one most people have witnessed. The same may be said for a woman letting her silk lingerie drop to the floor and the one leaf, still red, reappearing in springtime after surviving the winter. All these images are very graphic and make a good contrast to the more mysterious ones.

Sometimes free verse poems rely on *enjambment* for stylistic effect, meaning the running on of a thought from one line or stanza to the next without a syntactical break. In this poem, Hirshfield stops nearly half the lines with periods, forcing short sentences and frequent pauses throughout. Read the poem aloud, making full stops at each period, and listen to the slow, methodical, almost meditative rhythm that the pauses create. Although a specific metrical system is not identifiable, the poet is still able to mimic the strategy of such and to provide clear signals on how to read the work for its greatest effect.

Historical Context

The idea of personal enlightenment theology is not new to America, for various Oriental religious sects began showing up in the United States as early as the nineteenth century. Buddhism was introduced by two priests in San Francisco in 1898 and is still centered on the West Coast, although its popularity has spread across the country. Hinduism came to America via the Swami Vivekananada who introduced the religion at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. The Self-Realization Fellowship, considered a more practical form of Hinduism, has developed since 1920, stressing greater personal powers through peace of mind and good health. In the 1960s, interest in Hinduism was renewed, especially among the younger generation of the counterculture, when the teachings of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi reached thousands of interested ears through his position as leader of the International Meditation Society. A lesser-known Oriental theology, Bahaism, also arose in the nineteenth century with its major philosophy touting the institution of a worldwide religion. Leaders of Bahaism stress the main themes of the world's three prominent religions and gain inspiration from the great teachers of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Although varying sects of these theologies and philosophies find a home with Americans of both Eastern and non-Eastern descent today, perhaps none is as popular among the greatest variety of people as Zen Buddhism.

The Zen form of Buddhism originated in Japan after the arrival in that nation of Buddhism itself, spreading from India into China and then throughout Asia more than two thousand years ago. For centuries, the religion seemed confined to the Far East, but recent times have seen a proliferation throughout the entire world. What attracted young people, including Hirshfield, in 1960s and 1970s America to California to study the ideology of Buddhism and to put its teaching into practice most likely lies in the Zen sect's notion of transforming the *self* to find a oneness with the world and ultimate enlightenment for the individual. Above all, Zen stresses deep meditation by its students, preferably performed alone, although Zen centers attract thousands of people who meditate together in groups. Many followers who come to the Zen religion□ or philosophy, as some prefer to call it□ belong to centers and attend regular meditation sessions for the rest of their lives. Still others, like Hirshfield, dedicate a sizable chunk of their lives, such as eight years for the poet, and then take what they have learned back into the real world of their everyday lives. There, Zen teaching manifests itself in the things its students say and do□from the most miniscule task to major life decisions□without an intrusion of philosophical language or doctrine. Actually, it is the lack of doctrine and typical religious dogma that is the main attraction to Zen Buddhism for many Americans living in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. This does not necessarily mean a turning away from traditional theology or worship of a supreme being, as is inherent in more common religions, but it does imply a hunger for greater personal understanding and realization in a time of political, economical, and, perhaps most importantly, emotional instabilities.

Because the U.S. Census Bureau no longer records religious affiliation, estimates of the number of Buddhists in America in the late 1990s cannot be technically determined.

However, the trend toward Zen has been unmistakable, and, today, most analysts put the figure at between two and three million. In the midst of presidential scandal, ongoing battles in the Middle East, a roller coaster ride on the stock market, and sensationalized murder stories on the nightly news involving everyone from a football hero to a six-year-old beauty queen, the last decade of the twentieth century had people clamoring for some kind of spiritual comfort and intellectual understanding. Sometimes this need took the form of stronger family bonds and a return to more traditional church-going, and sometimes it meant individuals taking time to pause their lives long enough to observe and appreciate what was most important to them. Some turned to the country's most dominant religions of Christianity and Judaism, and some turned to Zen Buddhism, Islam, and any number of less established sects, as well as to self-created methods of understanding and coping with the world they live in. Although Hirshfield wrote "Three Times My Life Has Opened" and the rest of the poems for *The Lives of the Heart* before the tragedy of September 11, 2001, the same desire for peace of mind and personal enlightenment is just as vital for Americans today□and likely much more so.

Critical Overview

Hirshfield's poetry has been well received by scholarly critics and general readers since she published her first work in the 1980s. Most often, she is praised for her ability to present everyday life experiences in light of their deeper, spiritual meaning, but without becoming erudite or lapsing into philosophical rhetoric. Her use of simple language and soft tone belie the true force of her poetry's messages, and many critics have cited such in their reviews. In a book review of *The Lives of the Heart* for *Booklist*, critic Donna Seaman writes that Hirshfield's "imagery is simple in form but iridescent in implication; her meditative focus on stillness is curiously provocative and illuminating, and the veracity of all that Hirshfield has to say about forbearance and loss makes itself felt first and then is clearly understood." Seaman goes on to say that the poet "celebrates the epic strength of the heart, the sweetness of life, and the value of leaving things as they are" and that readers of her work experience "long moments of peace" while engaged with the poems. Very seldom is a writer credited with providing a reader such a gift.

Hirshfield has also been praised for her essays which often go hand in hand with her poems and for the readings of her work that draw large crowds. As poet, teacher, and critic Peter Harris states in an article for *Ploughshares*, "Because her poetry is pellucid [transparently clear] and speaks directly to the heart, it is not surprising that readings, from Maine to California, have given her a second means of sustenance." Any occasional reader of poetry understands the significance of Harris's statement and what it means about the acceptance of Hirshfield's work: one who actually makes money by reading her poetry in contemporary America must have something special going on indeed.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill addresses Hirshfield's claim that poetry is "a path toward new understanding and transformation" and suggests that this belief is the basis for Hirshfield's poem.

It is not difficult to be cynical about the world. It is not hard to let pessimism and doubt thwart any glimmers of serenity that show themselves among dark thoughts and dark days. And it is not unusual for the human mind to surrender to despair when confronted with the more challenging task of going forward in spite of it all, of accepting what comes and moving on. Transition is tough. It means one must face something new, something possibly threatening, possibly life-changing. But then there are those who say: *that's what it's all about change*. Hirshfield is one of those, and her poetry speaks eloquently to that effect. The words, like the poet herself, defy negativity even while acknowledging its presence, even when it seems like the dark days are here to stay. "Three Times My Life Has Opened" is a poem of defiance, but it does not stop there. Out of the resolve comes transformation, and out of the transformation comes understanding that elusive goal so often cast off as unattainable.

Sometimes a poem and the poet are so intimately connected that the reader becomes an intruder although a *welcomed* one peering into private thoughts and personal moments. In this poem, the connection is definitely intimate, but the reader is not excluded from it. Instead, Hirshfield twice directly addresses the reader, drawing him or her in to share the times the poet's life has "opened," even though "you will recognize" what she is saying "or you will not." Here, *feeling* and *acceptance* are of greater importance than recognition, for they precede whatever enlightenment is eventually to come. To avoid getting bogged down in esoteric philosophizing or abstract assumptions, it is best to let the poet herself explain. Hirshfield has given several interviews over the years, but one of the most interesting and revealing occurred in 1997 just as her collection of poems *The Lives of the Heart* and her collection of essays *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* were hitting the shelves. A writer for the *Atlantic Monthly*, Katie Bolick, spoke at length with the poet and published the interview as "Some Place Not Yet Known" with the magazine's online counterpart, *Atlantic Unbound*. In it, Hirshfield states, "I see poetry as a path toward new understanding and transformation, and so I've looked at . . . poetry's gestures in the broadest sense, in an effort to feel and learn what they offer from the inside." It is safe to assume that feeling and learning were a large part of the creation of "Three Times My Life Has Opened," and even if the reader's mind is left unsure of the poem's *specifics*, its "gestures" speak plainly to the heart.

One of those gestures is the nod Hirshfield gives to life's unhappy moments, the "darkness and rain" that inevitably descend into personal, social, or professional endeavors and that are seen here as opportunities for growth. There is no evidence of the nature of the unhappiness in this poem because that is not what is important. As a matter of fact, the moment is quickly swept aside to move on to the next time life

"opened" and the one following that. The descriptions of these times come in rapid succession, as though to hurry up and get to the main point, which is wrapped up in one line: "These three were not different." While readers may initially think the events are indeed different, another of the poem's gestures helps us understand that the poet knows what she is talking about when she says that they are not. Hirshfield turns to concrete description to draw everyone in to the same picture. Most people can relate to seeing the bright colors of autumn leaves, and most can envision a windy, late fall day when those leaves begin blowing from the trees in large swoops, eventually leaving the limbs bare like a woman who has disrobed, "dropping the colored silks." Suddenly, the abstract gestures have been brought into a real light. No matter how remote from true understanding life's openings may seem, they all come down to "a slip of light" that "stays" or "the one red leaf" in March that symbolizes an intact survival of inevitable transformation.

"Three Times My Life Has Opened" not only acknowledges the transience of life experiences, but it also welcomes and even celebrates it. In Bolick's interview with Hirshfield, the poet states that "It's easy to say yes to being happy, but it is harder to agree to grief and loss and transience and to the fact that desire is fathomless and ultimately unfillable. At some point I realized that you don't get a full human life if you try to cut off one end of it." This explains why the darkness and rain are no different from what the body remembers during lovemaking and the fire that encompasses everything. If the poet wrote only of the good things□of passion and love and pleasant memories□she would not be living a "full human life," which she believes one must do to be enlightened. As if to show the reward in accepting life's transitions, good or bad, Hirshfield takes the poem in a positive direction, making sure it ends on an optimistic note. Even though the door that opens closes immediately, there is a light left visible, a sign of hope for the human spirit. The final metaphor is even more encouraging, as a single red leaf endures the transformation of seasons, outlasting the harshest one to show itself again in spring.

Given all the evidence in this poem that it speaks to transformation as a positive notion, that it is essentially a tool for allowing the poet to achieve deeper understanding, the reader may still ask, "So why not just come out and say it? Why not just tell us what those three times life opened really were?" These are fair questions, especially since this poem is so *likeable*, so appealing to readers that we really want to grasp everything about it. But the focus here is on how the human mind really works, how most people achieve understanding and actually learn something about themselves or about events in their lives. Often, it is done through metaphoric expressions or thoughts, those indirect glances that may provide better insight than intellectual stare downs. Think of how frequently and casually human beings describe the way they feel by using metaphors: a man asks his wife how she feels after a hard day at work and she replies, "Like I was run over by a bus." A couple of teenagers who keep breaking up and getting back together probably think love is "like a roller coaster." An angry man may be told not to "blow his top,"and a cowboy at a disco is "a fish out of water." Songwriters would be out of business if they could not use metaphors, as would most speech writers and, of course, poets. In "Three Times My Life Has Opened," the messages *depend* on metaphoric imagery. Instead of bluntly stating that once life opened into bad times,

depression, sadness, or anger, Hirshfield covers all those possibilities with one description: "darkness and rain." Rather than explaining how positive outcomes can emerge from dubious beginnings, the poet *shows* the reader a beautiful autumn leaf still sporting its bright color in spite of being buried under snow for a few months. Ironically, the messages are made stronger by their indirection. As Hirshfield puts it: "instead of simply saying 'I'm sad,' a poem describes rainfall or the droop of a branch." Fortunately for the reader, Hirshfield puts this tactic to wonderful use in her work.

If it is true, then, that this poem is based on a desire to understand and to transform the self, there is one further, similar *use* for poetry that is also at work here. Toward the end of the *Atlantic* interview, Hirshfield states, "And so I see poetry not as an attempt to accurately depict an experience already known but as the making of a new experience that presses into some place not yet known." In this poem, the three times life opened are certainly not "accurately" depicted for the reader, but it seems that they may not be all that much clearer to the poet herself. And that is okay. The darkness and rain, the fire, whatever the body carries within it□all serve as paths to something beyond what they actually are. The door that opens and closes may be a real door, but it is also a mechanism of new experience. It provides the means by which the "slip of light" is able to remain on the floor "like a scrap of unreadable paper." This latter phrase carries even more significance when considered along with the desire to move into "some place not yet known." One may be tempted to connote "unreadable" with frustration or inability, but that is not the implication here. Although specific words are not discernible, there is a *feeling* of comfort in the presence of the paper, or in the presence of the light. Compared to the concrete definition of something, a feeling leaves more room for "the making of a new experience," for it is more pliable, more open, and more receptive. Consider, also, the statement, "Neither are we different in what we know." At first, this notion seems to come out of nowhere and even to be out of place in the poem. But it is actually a connection between the poet and the reader that implies both shared *known* and shared *unknown* experiences. Essentially anyone can describe something that has happened, telling who, what, when, and where, but anyone can do something else as well. As Hirshfield puts it, "My job as a human being as well as a writer is to feel as thoroughly as possible the experience that I am part of, and then press it a little further." This may be a bit cumbersome or pose too much expectation on people who find it easier just to let things occur as they will and then either simply forget them or, if necessary, react as nonconfrontationally as possible. Most of us are not keen on the idea of feeling something thoroughly and then pressing it still further, and yet this poet and this poem insist that all of us are capable of it. One must *want* to achieve enlightenment before it can be accomplished, but the desire is not always a given.

Without Hirshfield's own input on her thoughts about poetry in general and on the making of *The Lives of the Heart* in particular, the final poem in that collection would still be engaging and insightful, though perhaps not as much so. Still, it is a good lesson to learn about both writing and reading poetry: sometimes feelings are more important than factual accounts; sometimes sideways glances allow more space to muse and ponder; and sometimes letting the words flow as they may leads to a new understanding that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Three Times My Life Has Opened," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Prebilic is an independent author who writes and analyses children's literature. She holds degrees in psychology and business. In this essay, Prebilic discusses how Jane Hirshfield's poem invites readers to experience the wholeness of love, including its dark side.

The poem "Three Times My Life Has Opened," in *Lives of the Heart* by Jane Hirshfield, shares three significant events that caused the speaker's life to be changed in a memorable way. Hirshfield's introductory line proclaims that her life has opened three times. Opened to what, the readers do not know, and this intrigue draws readers to examine the poem repeatedly. This attentiveness will enable the reader to grasp a deeper meaning that can ultimately enlighten or transcend the reader's life. This action is precisely Hirshfield's attempt. She hopes to lure readers into attentiveness, to give them things to think about that will have them eventually walk away from the poem with a greater awareness of themselves, of life. This exercise helps readers live life more fully.

An interpretation of this poem requires a brief insight into Hirshfield's background and influences. Hirshfield's proclivity for writing emerged at an early age; at the age of nine, she purchased her first book, a collection of haiku. As a young adult at Princeton, she created an independent major in creative writing and literature in translation. This shows her willingness to transcend structure and create a framework for herself. Next, according to Peter Harris in the *Ploughshares* article "About Jane Hirshfield," "[w]hat began as a month's commitment turned into eight years of study with the San Francisco Zen Center, including three years . . . living in deep wilderness." Through these experiences, Hirshfield developed her "tripod" of vocations: teacher, reader, and editor, to support herself as a poet.

Her openness to all forms of poetry shows in Hirshfield's depth of writing style. Her influences include both Eastern and Western traditions. According to Hirshfield, in her biography in *Contemporary Women Poets*, "Greek and Roman lyrics, the English sonnet . . . Whitman and Dickinson . . . Eliot to Akhmatova to Cavafy to Neruda□all have added something" to her perspective and style. Hirshfield's willingness to be open to life, to create her world, and to stay attentive to the moment have promoted a wholeness in herself that she began to express early in her career. This foundation led to her philosophy (as quoted by Harris) that "poetry's job is to discover wholeness and create wholeness, including the wholeness of the fragmentary and the broken."

In considering Hirshfield's influences, a reader cannot help but acknowledge the art of haiku, a precise Japanese verse form. Haiku presents the aspects of nature and contains a reference to a season of the year. Hirshfield uses this literary technique in reference to the maple tree. As the maple tree symbolically steps from her leaves, she leaves herself bare and vulnerable. Hirshfield presents this analogy expertly. Her presentation symbolizes the vulnerability of love. Vulnerability seldom arises in our society as something to cherish or about which to boast. Instead, people consider

vulnerability a weakness, a despicable quality to overcome, to make stronger, and to get beyond. Yet, without vulnerability, love would not be complete. Vulnerability allows the clothing to be stripped away, the leaves to fall, so that the unabashed presentation of love can be enjoyed. One cannot truly love without vulnerability. It is this point that Hirshfield strives to make; only through attentiveness to love and acceptance of all of its facets, including the broken ones, can one truly find wholeness and lead a rich life. Her use of haiku to present this analogy works well.

Readers experience Hirshfield's tie to Zen Buddhism as she describes these experiences of the opening of the heart. Zen aims to achieve a state of spiritual enlightenment through meditation called *satori*. As Harris notes,

> the emphases on *compassion*, on the preexistent *unity of subject and object*, on *nature*, on the self-sufficient suchness of *being*, on the daunting challenge of accepting *transitoriness*—all are central to Buddhism.

Hirshfield's attentiveness typifies the thoughtfulness pursued in the practice of Zen Buddhism. She uses simple, short sentences with meaningful words to draw readers into the experience of wholeness.

If readers quietly reflect on "Three Times My Life Has Opened," these innermost ideas of Buddhism emerge. Hirshfield shows compassion when she says that "neither are we different in what we know." She implies unity of spirit. Her use of na- ture—darkness, rain, fire, a maple tree—develops a unity of subject and object. By using these Earth elements, she suggests the preexistent unity between human experience and natural occurrence. Hirshfield uses both positive and negative symbolic images, such as an act of love and darkness. This approach encourages readers to recognize the full experience of love, not just the elements of pleasure most commonly associated with it.

Readers will note the Buddhist theme of *being* when Hirshfield acknowledges in her verse that they may or may not identify with what she is saying. These lines display Hirshfield's compassion and understanding to readers; it confirms the complexity of her ideas. Nevertheless, Hirshfield gently prods readers on a journey of self-discovery much like the "one red leaf the snow releases in March." Hirshfield hopes that her creativity and attentiveness to things will be contagious and help others to learn and from there, lead a more meaningful life.

Hirshfield starts readers on this journey by beginning her poem with the analogy of darkness and rain. In five simple words "Once, into darkness and rain," Hirshfield immediately gives readers the sense of the completeness of her poem. It brings readers to the awareness that opening to life does not mean experiencing only joy and contentment; darkness and pain are an integral and unavoidable part of life and love.

To examine the deeper meanings of this poem, readers must take some time to focus on each element. At a glance, rain symbolizes the unhappiness or grief caused by an event; writers regularly use it in literature to represent sadness. Darkness in an

emotional sense also means sadness, loss, and emptiness. Yet, if one focuses on each element individually, as Hirshfield suggests, additional ideas come to mind.

For example, rain no longer is just water falling from the sky. Readers find that it varies in size of drop, speed of fall, and intensity of the storm. Raindrops can be small and round. Larger drops flatten due to the force of air flowing around them. The largest raindrops alternate between a flattened shape and a stretched out shape. Likewise, many factors affect how rain forms and falls. Storms can be light or heavy, with many variations in between. Only undistracted attention to the raindrops and their journey brings about a full understanding of what rain actually is. Hirshfield's intention is to use nature and elements of unity to bring a deeper perspective of things into readers' awareness.

Hirshfield continues, stating that the speaker's life opened when entering the act of love. This experience invoked a memory of "what the body carries at all time within it." This phrase requires mindfulness in interpretation; it shows extraordinary depth since Hirshfield does not explicitly state what she means. Hirshfield suggests that the "something" that stays with humans becomes more profound with the experience of entering into an act of love. Perhaps entering the act of love may make readers more aware of their hearts, their intentions, their love for another, and their passions.

The third opening occurs "Once to the fire that holds all." Since the times of ancient Greece, people considered fire to be one of the four basic elements of life. Its mysteries have intrigued and frustrated people for centuries. On the surface, fire is the heat and light that comes from burning substances. Yet, a deeper perspective unveils a new outlook. Three conditions must exist before a fire can be made. There must be a substance that can burn. Substances may burn in different ways. The fuel must be heated to its ignition temperature, and there must be plenty of oxygen, which usually comes from the air. Fire takes different shapes, burns in many colors and intensities.

Likewise, in literature, fire can be tremendously complex. It can be used to represent light and the heavens. It can stand for aggression such as a fire-breathing dragon, or an act of God. Symbolically, fire may be a deep desire for someone or something, or a hatred and revenge that's left smoldering. Hirshfield uses fire as a symbol of a desire "that holds all." One assumes that this fire ignited and opened her up to greater attentiveness in life, a deep meaningful experience.

The poem presents darkness, rain, love, and fire and calls on a unity of spirit. "Neither are we different in what we know." Although readers' experiences may be different, and each element may invoke a unique perspective to the each reader, Hirshfield draws on the commonality of human experience. "There is a door. It opens. Then it is closed." What readers get out of it depends on their level of attentiveness, their openness to transformation. Hirshfield notes that "a slip of light stays" after the door closes. It may be that only a faint memory stays behind, like an "unreadable paper left on the floor." On the other hand, it may leave a far deeper meaning, like the "one red leaf the snow releases in March." Regardless, experiences leave some meaning.

Hirshfield makes the point that the meaning depends on the quality of attentiveness. In "Jane Hirshfield in Conversation with Judith Moore," published in *Poetry Daily*, she says that through attentiveness

we can know the nature and qualities of our . . . existence
the entrance gate [to] . . . know it, taste it,
consider it, work with it as a potter works with clay.

Only using attentiveness can readers make meaning of Hirshfield's contrasting images. She presents love, desire, and passion along with sadness, darkness, and loss. Hirshfield does not remark on the link between these images but leaves the blending of them to the reader. As a reader absorbs the poem's effects, meanings about the experiences of love and life emerge and grow.

The wholeness of life depends on the level of attentiveness. Thus, the red leaf hangs powerfully in the silence at the end of the poem. It lands brightly on the landscape, clearly out of place for the season, yet naturally occurring. It is not something planned, something contrived. Yet, it concludes that the quality of the experience depends on attentiveness. Hirshfield hopes to help each reader to be receptive to the light and the dark. Both elements add to life's richness, its wholeness.

Source: Michelle Prebilic, Critical Essay on "Three Times My Life Has Opened," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Covintree is a graduate of Randolph-Macon Women's College with a degree in English. In this essay, Covintree explores the structure of Hirshfield's poem and the poem's direct attempt to connect with the reader.

Jane Hirshfield's poem "Three Times My Life Has Opened," the very last poem in her collection entitled *Lives of the Heart*, speaks to the idea of personal revelation and discovery. Almost expressly in the middle of the poem, Hirshfield directly addresses the reader, saying "You will recognize what I am saying or you will not." With this statement, she challenges readers to a more careful examination of both the poem and the self.

Hirshfield's poem is thirteen lines total and comprised of nine short sentences and three long sentences. Hirshfield carefully uses both line and sentence. A line is the grouping of words that comprises one row of writing. Many sentences take up more than one line, and some lines do not hold a complete sentence. Many poets are keenly aware of the difference, and for Hirshfield, she has broken her long sentences into the poetic space of three or four lines each. In doing this, Hirshfield created intentional breaks in her sentences and indents the poem at these line breaks. What is produced is a form to the poem of alternating long and short lines, visually enhanced by the indentations. This selfinvented style determines how the poem is read. The first seven lines of the poem catalog, or list, the times life has opened for the speaker.

The first line, a repeat of the title, introduces the list that is to follow. The seventh line, briefly explains what is cataloged. Each of the three instances in the middle of these bookends, begins with the word, "Once," as if each holds equal weight and transience. Though the second example is longer than the others, it is no more detailed or descriptive. All three are filled with images that are both distinct and unspecific. Hirshfield does not specify the particulars of the "darkness and rain" the speaker has encountered. Nor does she define what type of "act of love" has been entered into or give details as to what the "fire that holds all" is.

All three examples could have literal definitions, (it gets dark at night, it rains, someone is having sex, fire consumes) but they can also be open to interpretation (depression, joy, loss). This personal interpretation is part of the poem's goal. As Hirshfield herself stated in a 1997 interview with Katie Bolick in *Atlantic Unbound*, "part of poetry's core activity, both within an individual and within a culture, is to attend to and make visible what Jung called the shadow life."

In each of these three sentences, it is clear the speaker is not describing the same situation. However, it is also clear that her experience to all three is similar. It could be interpreted that these three instances describe stages of life. "Darkness and rain" could be birth. Life could be represented in "what the body carries at all times within it / and starts to remember each time it enters into / the act of love." "The fire that holds all" could be the inevitability of death. Hirshfield has described three stages that are all related and all powerful. However, more importantly, what makes them similar is the

revelation stated in the first line. Through these three moments, the speaker's life "has opened."

Then, as alluded to earlier, the poem turns in its focus with the speaker directly addressing the audience and saying, "[y]ou will recognize what I am saying or you will not." Now, the reader is no longer observing someone else but is suddenly challenged to reexamine the earlier catalog for personal life-opening experiences that equal the descriptions Hirshfield lists. As the poet shares in *Atlantic Unbound*, Hirshfield uses poetry as "a place where the thinking of the heart, mind, and body come together." The general statements in this poem allow the reader to inquire within him or herself, generating a personal examination for each reader. If the reader cannot relate to these, the reader is drawn to remember or create his or her own possible list. Has my life opened? When? How? What was my experience?

If self-reflection could still prove difficult, Hirshfield brings the speaker and the reader a new experience, the observation of a maple in fall. The speaker personifies this tree as a woman undressing for her lover, winter. This active example parallels the second experience in the earlier list. Both are two of the longest sentences in the poem. Both reflect on love. In that second listing, the speaker states that her life opened "into what the body carries at all times within it / and starts to remember each time it enters into / the act of love." By shedding a tree of leaves, something a tree carries at all times, because of the tree's love for the next season, Hirshfield brings a more specific understanding to the earlier line.

What is then exposed for the tree is nakedness. Yet, this is a nakedness that is filled with clarity and choice. It is the opportunity to recognize an aspect of the self that is often otherwise hidden. Human bodies do not carry leaves, of course, but when one "enters into / the act of love" what humans do carry is both released and exposed like the leaves "dropping the colored silks." With this release, the speaker is enlightened and the poet's intentions are seen. "My job as a human being as well as a writer," Hirshfield told *Atlantic Unbound*, "is to feel as thoroughly as possible the experience that I am a part of, and then press it a little further."

This is the hope, but this same metaphor also explores a converse idea to enlightenment. A tree shedding its leaves for winter is a common, simple experience. Whether the poet observes this, the leaves will fall to the ground. The fact the poet sees the experience and can then personalize it is of major importance. The poet is witness to a moment of clarity for this personified tree and her surrender to winter love. But this is the poet's recognition; someone else (even the tree itself) could miss this moment. In this way, the body from earlier often misses the experience of clarity, though the potential, "what the body carries at all times," is ever present. The opportunity for clarity is continuously made available, but for the poet, and the reader, the actual ability for recognition is limited.

In this way, the final four lines of the poem reinforce the ease and difficulty of discovering clarity. It is accessible, "[t]here is a door." It is made present, [i]t opens." It is hidden from us, "[t]hen it is closed. Then, each of us is simply left with the memory. By

breaking the first line in the middle of a thought with the word "slip" and enjambing the statement "[b]ut a slip / of light stays" Hirshfield uses form to help her in two ways. First, the slip reinforces the door image written earlier in the line, as you can visualize the door opened just slightly or the cracks in the door letting the light through. Secondly, putting slip at the end of the line allows the reader to stop on the word for a moment and recognize the accidental nature of the clarity that has been shown.

This is what the speaker has been left with, not the immediate instance of clarity, but the knowledge that it has been available. The poet is keenly aware of what was present but is forced to let it go. The speaker is also aware that the memory is not equal to full understanding nor as useful. However, the memory, "the one red leaf the snow releases / in March," is sustainable and sufficient.

Source: Kate Covintree, Critical Essay on "Three Times My Life Has Opened," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

In 1999, Bill Moyers recorded interviews and readings with eleven poets who had attended the 1998 Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival in Waterloo Village, New Jersey. The series, comprising nine videocassettes, each running twenty-seven minutes, is called *Sounds of Poetry* and is a production of Public Affairs Televisions, Inc. Poets included are Hirshfield, Lucille Clifton, Stanley Kunitz, and Robert Pinsky, among others.

Hirshfield recorded more than twenty-five poems from three of her collections on a fortyeight- minute tape catalogued simply as *Reader: Jane Hirshfield*. Recorded in 1995, it is available through the Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives at San Francisco State University. Detailed information can be found online at http://www.sfsu.edu/~poetry/ (last accessed June 13, 2002).

Topics for Further Study

Write a poem called "Three Times My Life Has Closed" and try to use a mixture of abstract and concrete imagery as Hirshfield does in her poem. Are you able to convey your meaning without revealing too much? Why or why not?

Choose a religion or philosophy other than your own and write an essay describing its major tenets and where it is most popular in the world. Explain how this religion or philosophy has influenced contemporary followers and whether any significant changes have taken place in its teachings as a result.

Why have thousands, possibly millions, of Americans turned to the practice of Zen Buddhism? How does Zen differ from mainstream Buddhism and why do the differences make it even more appealing to some people?

If Hirshfield had decided to write a poem called "*Four* Times My Life Has Opened," what would that fourth event entail? Where would she have placed it within the body of the poem and why would that placement be significant in relation to the three times already mentioned? Try to make your answer "fit" the poem by writing from Hirshfield's philosophical perspective.

Read the poem "Anasazi," written by Zen poet Gary Snyder, and explain how it compares or contrasts to Hirshfield's poem in its theme, style, and tone. Which poem do you find easier to understand or relate to? Why?

What Do I Read Next?

Buddhist Women on the Edge: Contemporary Perspective from the Western Frontier (1996), edited by Marianne Dresser, consists largely of non-Oriental women discussing the importance of Buddhist thought in their own lives. Hirshfield's "What Is the Emotional Life of a Buddha?" is included.

Gary Snyder is one of the more prominent Zen poets writing in America today. One of his most popular collections, *Turtle Island* (1974), is also the most revealing of Zen influence in America. The title comes from a Native American term for the continent of North America, and Snyder's poems speak to a desire to reclaim the environmental harmony that once existed here. This book won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975.

In 2000, *Newsweek* magazine's religion editor, Kenneth Woodward, published *The Book of Miracles: The Meaning of the Miracle Stories in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam*. Here, Woodward uses his easily understood, conversational style to relate the details of how many well-known miracle stories came about. The book is very accessible to the general reader and avoids didacticism in favor of telling a good story.

Hirshfield is not only a poet but a translator of poetry as well, primarily Japanese. Her 1988 publication of *The Ink Dark Moon: Love Poems by Ono No Komachi and Izumi Shikibu* is evidence of her notable skill in translating the sensual, intriguing poetry of these two Japanese women who lived between the ninth and eleventh centuries A.D. These love poems address the poets' longing for intimacy as well as their fulfillment or disillusionment.

Though published over twenty years ago in 1980, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* is still one of the best discussions on how the human mind uses metaphorical references to learn and to develop. The book is very readable even though its subject is philosophical, and it is especially appealing to anyone who enjoys writing prose or poetry. The book is full of examples that back up the authors' viewpoints, and it brings some tired old metaphors into new and interesting light.

Further Study

Brown, Kurt, ed., *Facing the Lion: Writers on Life and Craft*, Beacon Press, 1996.

This is a collection of recorded lectures given by poets and fiction writers at various writing conferences across the country, including one by Hirshfield. The editor saw fit to title the entire collection after Hirshfield's "Facing the Lion: The Way of Shadow and Light in Some Twentieth-Century Poems," as it metaphorically addresses the "lions" that many writers face in trying to make language as effective and important as possible.

Hirshfield, Jane, *Given Sugar, Given Salt*, HarperCollins, 2001.

This is Hirshfield's latest poetry collection, and, like those before it, the work has been praised for its accessibility to all readers as well as its richness in imagery and creative insights. It reads almost as a continuation to *The Lives of the Heart*.

□, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, Harper- Collins, 1997.

Published at the same time as *The Lives of the Heart*, this collection of essays by Hirshfield makes a useful "companion piece" to the poetry book. The essays provide detailed insight into her "ideas about the art of poetry and its workings," as she describes in the preface.

□, ed., *Women in Praise of the Sacred: 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women*, HarperCollins, 1994.

This collection includes poems, prayers, and songs by women throughout history from a wide variety of religious backgrounds. Hirshfield provides biographies and insightful commentary to accompany the poems, and her selection of poets serves to illuminate the values she incorporates in her own work.

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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

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