To an Unknown Poet Study Guide

To an Unknown Poet by Carolyn Kizer

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Introduction

"To an Unknown Poet," was first published in *Michigan Quarterly Review* and subsequently appeared in Carolyn Kizer's 1986 collection, *The Nearness of You.* It is included in a section of poems called "Friends," which contains numerous poems about, and dedicated to, other poets. In the poem, Kizer, a much decorated and Pulitzer- Prize winning poet, ironically compares the successful life of a much-decorated poet with the life of an unsuccessful and struggling poet. Kizer wrote the poem shortly after winning the Pulitzer Prize for her collection *Yin: New Poems.* In simple, straightforward language, the speaker addresses a poor poet who comes to visit her, making excuses for why she does not have time for him, and then later telling him about an award she is about to receive. Her response addresses issues including the place of poetry in American society, the role of the poet, and the nature of literary fame. Kizer's poem appeared at a time when more poetry is produced and published□in print, on the web, etc.□and more poetry readings are given than perhaps at any other time in American history. It also comes at a time when, even though an increasing number of people hunger for literary recognition, fewer and fewer people read poetry or even attend poetry readings. The gulf between "known" poets and "unknown" poets widens daily, but even those known are known by only a few.

Author Biography

Carolyn Kizer has fashioned her career as a poet by being part of the very institutions that poets once loved to criticize: the government and the university. The only child of activists Benjamin Hamilton, a lawyer, and Mabel Ashley Kizer, a union organizer who held a doctorate in biology, Kizer was born December 10, 1925 in Spokane, Washington. She was raised in a heady and rich learning environment. Diplomats, artists, poets, and intellectuals frequently visited her parents, and her house was filled with books, paintings, and various art objects, in many ways resembling the house of the speaker in her poem, "To an Unknown Poet." Mabel Kizer poured her energies into her daughter's development, encouraging her artistic inclinations. It was not until after her mother died, however, that Kizer recognized the influence her mother had on her.

After Kizer received her undergraduate degree from Sarah Lawrence College in 1945, she took graduate courses at Columbia University and later took graduate courses at the University of Washington, where she studied under the poet Theodore Roethke. Like her mother, Kizer was an organizer, founding the influential journal *Poetry Northwest* in 1959 and editing it until 1965. She was the first director of literary programs for the National Endowment for the Arts and served as a State Department specialist in literature in Pakistan during 1964 and 1965. In addition, she was the director of a number of creative writing programs through the 1970s and 1980s. A much sought-after teacher, Kizer has taught at numerous universities, including the University of Washington, Princeton University, Columbia University, Ohio University, and at Iowa University's Writer's Workshop.

When she was only 17, Kizer published her first poem in the *New Yorker.* Her first collection of poetry, *The Ungrateful Garden,* appeared in 1961 and established her reputation as a poet of uncompromising vision. No romantic, Kizer focused on nature's brutality and indifference to human beings' existence. It is what it is, her poems emphasized. Future volumes of poetry addressed the idea of gender roles and women's place in a changing society. Kizer is adept at composing both formal and free verse poetry. Kizer's other poetry collections include *Cool Calm & Collected: Poems 1960-2000* (2000); *Harping On: Poems 1985- 1995* (1996); *The Nearness of You: Poems for Men* (1986); *Yin: New Poems* (1984), which won a Pulitzer Prize; and *Mermaids in the Basement: Poems for Women* (1984). Her criticism includes *Picking and Choosing: Essays on Prose* (1995), and *Proses: Essays on Poems & Poets* (1993). Kizer has also published a collection of translations, *Carrying Over: Translations from Chinese, Urdu, Macedonian, Hebrew and French-African* (1988), and edited a number of anthologies. Apart from the Pulitzer Prize, she has received an American Academy of Arts and Letters award, the Frost Medal, the John Masefield Memorial Award, and the Theodore Roethke Memorial Poetry Award. Kizer is a former Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets.

Poem Text

I haven't the heart to say
you are not welcome here.
Your clothes smell of poverty, illness
and unswept closets.
You come unannounced to my door
with your wild-faced wife and your many children.
I tell you I am busy.
I have a dentist's appointment.
I have a terrible cold.
The children would run mad
through our living room, with its collected
bibelots and objects of art.
I'm not as young as I was.
I am terrified of breakage.
It's not that I won't help you.
I'd love to send you a box
of hand-milled soap;
perhaps a check,
though it won't be enough to help.
Keep in mind that I came to your reading:
Three of us in the audience,
your wife, myself, and the book-store owner,
unless we count the children who played trains
over your wife's knees in their torn jeans
and had to be hushed and hushed.
Next month I am getting an award
from the American Academy
and Institute of Arts and Letters.
The invitation came on hand-laid paper
thick as clotted cream.
I will travel by taxi
to 156th Street, where the noble old building,
as pale as the Acropolis,
is awash in a sea of slums.
And you will be far away, on the other coast,
as far from our thoughts as Rimbaud
with his boy's face and broken teeth,
while we eat and drink and congratulate each other
in this bastion of culture.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

In the first stanza of "To an Unknown Poet," the speaker plays on the word "unknown." Traditionally, it has meant that the identity of the person is not known, as in, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Kizer, however, is using it to mean that the poet does not have a reputation—that he is one of the many millions of poets who write but receive little or no public recognition for their writing. The speaker characterizes the poet through her description of his clothes and his impolite behavior (he comes "unannounced"). She makes excuses for why she cannot entertain him, which are all lies.

The speaker characterizes herself through her description of the things she has in her house, the "bibelots and objects of art," precious ornaments and such. The last line of the stanza can be read two ways. "Breakage" can literally mean that she is afraid of the children breaking her delicate possessions; it can also mean that she herself is "terrified of breakage"—breakage of her soul, breakage of her own moral obligations.

Stanza 2

In this stanza, the speaker attempts to show that she is thoughtful and considerate by claiming that she would help the poet. She notes that she came to the poet's reading, indeed that she was the only other adult at the reading apart from the bookstore owner and the poet's wife. She mentions this detail as a way of proving her support for the poet. The mention, again, of the children and wife helps to characterize the poet's poverty and his utter lack of reputation or readership.

Stanza 3

In this stanza, the speaker details her own success as a poet, mentioning the award she will receive, and the quality of the paper on which the invitation is printed. The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters is the most prestigious literary organization in America and one which Kizer herself received an award from in 1985. Membership in the exclusive organization is limited to 250.

Stanza 4

The speaker notes how she will travel to receive the award. She compares the building in which she will be honored with the Acropolis, a hill in Athens widely regarded as the most important site in the city for its cultural and historical significance. Called "the sacred rock," Acropolis hill is home to the Temple of Athena Nike and the Parthenon, the latter of which remains the international symbol of ancient Greek civilization. By likening the "noble old building" to the Acropolis, and then locating it "in a sea of slums," the

speaker is also figuratively describing her position in relation to the sea of poor, unknown, and uncelebrated poets who will never receive an award or recognition for their writing. The Academy is located at 632 West 156th Street, Manhattan, in the center of Harlem.

The last four lines of the poem return to describing the "unknown poet" of the first two stanzas. Addressing him, she says that the participants in the awards ceremony will not be thinking of him, but will be consumed with their own selfimportance, enjoying themselves "in this bastion of culture." Her description of Rimbaud, a nineteenthcentury French poet known for his wild and hallucinatory images, who was rejected by the literary establishment, emphasizes the pathetic desires of the unknown poet.

Themes

Privilege and Entitlement

In a way, "To an Unknown Poet" is a sustained critique on the power of privilege, and entitlement for those poets who have made a living at their craft. To receive an award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, as the poem's speaker does (and as Kizer herself has), is to have achieved one of the highest degrees of recognition possible for poets in America. It often means that publication and teaching jobs will come much more easily, if they have not already, and that the committees who dole out grants and award money for government and private organizations will look more favorably on any application a winner might submit. Indeed, the fact of having received such an award most likely means that a winner has been a member of those very committees, as Kizer has, having served as the first director of the Literature Program at the National Endowment for the Arts and as a chancellor for the Academy of American Poets.

Class

Social class is determined often as much by taste as it is by education and wealth, or the lack of. Kizer's poem highlights the difference in class between the speaker and the "unknown poet," by describing their respective possessions and family. The speaker's house contains "bibelots and objects of art," suggesting that she values, and can afford to buy, precious things. The poet, on the other hand, has a "wild-faced wife" and "many children" who wear "torn jeans," and gives poetry readings that literally no one attends. The speaker figuratively links him with the "sea of slums" that surrounds the Acropolis-like building where she is to receive her award. By underscoring the differences in class between the speaker and the unknown poet, Kizer uses the divisions within the literary world as a metaphor for the social injustices of America. It is not only unsung poets whom Kizer wants to remind readers to remember, but also all those who are not as well off as others, through no fault of their own. Through caricaturing a successful poet, Kizer feeds the prejudices of some, who see all poets as pretentious and elitist, while simultaneously courting the sympathy of those who can respect a person who pursues his art out of passion rather than a desire for fame.

Distance

Kizer uses the idea of distance both figuratively and literally in her poem to highlight the gap between the haves and the have nots. First, the speaker emphasizes the distance between her success, and the failure of the unknown poet, through her condescending descriptions of his struggles, and the self-congratulatory descriptions of her achievements. She also emphasizes the distance in age, noting, "I'm not as young as I was," and then comparing the unknown poet with Rimbaud's "boy's face and broken

teeth." Though she never explicitly says it, the speaker is envious of the unknown poet's youth. When she travels to New York City for her award, she notes her distance from the poet, who remains on the West Coast, and the fact that he is "far from our thoughts." Ironically, by noting this, she suggests just the opposite, that he has remained in her thoughts.

Style

Irony

At its most basic level, irony is saying one thing while meaning another. Kizer uses a persona, her speaker, who is condescending, though seemingly well-intentioned, to criticize the attitude of writers who consider themselves superior to others. By listing what she has done, or would do, to help the poet, who obviously is not well off, the speaker attempts to assuage her guilt and prove that she is a moral person. Readers, however, can see through her rationalizations and in the end despise the speaker while feeling sympathetic for the unknown poet.

Address

Throughout the poem, the speaker addresses the unknown poet in a conversational tone, calling him "you." Details of the poet's visit to the speaker's house aside, the unknown poet in this poem is representative of unknown poets everywhere. In this way, the address of the poem is an apostrophe. An apostrophe is a figure of speech in which the speaker addresses someone as if he were physically present, but is not. Apostrophes are often used to address abstract ideas as well, for example when Thomas Hardy addresses love in his poem "I Said to Love."

Details

Details are the small things, the particulars that make up a whole. Kizer uses details to characterize the speaker and the unknown poet, showing readers their emotional lives by depicting their surroundings. Kizer provides details of what is in the speaker's house to illustrate her rarefied tastes, and she provides details of the unknown poet's family and poetry reading to illustrate his struggle.

Historical Context

In the 1980s, three "styles" of poetry captured the attention of critics and the poetry-reading public: narrative poetry, new formalism, and language poetry. Although narrative poetry literally has been around since before the Greeks, it re-emerged in the 1980s as a response to the predominance of the lyric and to the increasing level of abstraction in poets such as John Ashbery. Proponents of narrative poetry, such as Robert McDowell, called for poetry based in the real world that was accessible to a wider audience. A manifesto published in *The Reaper,* a literary journal of narrative and formal verse founded by McDowell and Mark Jarman in 1981, called many of the poets of the day, "navel gazers and mannerists." McDowell and Jarman wrote: "Their poems, too long even when they are short, full of embarrassing lines that 'context' is supposed to justify, confirm the suspicion that our poets just aren't listening to their language anymore."

McDowell urged poets to write about subjects other than themselves and to write artfully, but to be understood. Above all, he urged them to return to storytelling, the language of the tribe. After a century of free-verse poetry, and a few decades of the highly ironic fixed-form verse of Richard Wilbur and others, the United States also saw the comeback of formal verse during the 1980s. Writers such as Molly Peacock, Timothy Steele, Brad Leithauser, and William Logan gave new vitality to old forms, working in sonnets, villanelles, and sestinas, among other verse forms.

Published in *The New Criterion,* a journal founded by Hilton Kramer, who took the name from a journal edited by T. S. Eliot, many of the new formalists were derided as country-club poets and literary lackeys of the Right. The work of the new formalists is highlighted in the 1986 anthology, *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms.* McDowell considers both new formalism and new narrative part of the "Expansive Movement," the tenets of which are sketched out in the critical anthology, *Poetry after Modernism* (1991), edited by McDowell and published by his own Story Line Press.

Both new narrative poetry and the new formalism were staunchly opposed to language poetry, whose writers include Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, and Bob Perelman, among others. Language writers, whose politics invariably aligned with the Left, criticized the official verse culture of the academy and argued for *more* abstraction in poetry, not less. For the most part, language writers championed the materiality of the word, questioned the value(s) of the lyric poem, indeed, questioned the necessity for genres themselves, and disdained the institutionalization of creative writing. It is no coincidence that language poetry emerged contemporaneously with post-structuralist theory. Its appearance was not coincidental, but symptomatic of the shift away from treating literature as an expressive indicator of universal human values, and to treating it as an always political act and a material act in itself. It is interesting to note that both Perleman and Bernstein now hold tenured posts in American universities.

Critical Overview

"To an Unknown Poet" is included in Kizer's *The Nearness of You,* published in 1986 as a companion volume to her 1984 collection, *Mermaids in the Basement.* Whereas *Mermaids* consists of poems for women, *Nearness* consists of poems for men, and includes many poems from earlier volumes, including poems written or dedicated to other poets and writers, such as Robert Creeley, Bernard Malamud, Theodore Roethke, and James Wright. The book is separated into four sections, "Manhood," "Passions," "Father," and "Friends," and Kizer's address in this volume is more direct, her voice more personal, her style less formal. Reviewers gave the book a lukewarm reception. Anthony Libby, writing for the *New York Times Book Review,* asserts, "Despite many local triumphs, the new collection is in many ways less striking, technically and psychologically more self-conscious [than *Mermaids in the Basement*]." Diane Wakoski, however, praises the risks Kizer takes in this collection, in her review for *Women's Review of Books* : "What this book convinces me of, finally, is that Carolyn Kizer is a poet of occasion, of person and personality." Writing for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Elizabeth House also focuses on Kizer's personality, noting, "Kizer has known many writers, and, indeed, she is widely esteemed as a teacher, mentor, and guide for aspiring poets." House singles out "To An Unknown Poet," observing the "wry humor" in the poem. Sister Bernetta Quinn also discusses the poem in her essay on Kizer in *An Answering Music: Poetry of Carolyn Kizer,* writing of the speaker's "selfdisapproval" and "guilt."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of literature whose writing appears regularly in literary journals. In this essay, Semansky considers Kizer's representation of literary culture and academia.

Kizer's poem, "To an Unknown Poet," is an indictment of a literary culture that is structured like the star system of Hollywood. Tens of thousands of people audition, but there is room for only a handful of stars. Those poets who do make it are invariably associated with a university or college, most often teaching in creative writing programs. Kizer herself has been a poet-in-residence at a number of prestigious schools including Princeton, Columbia, and Stanford. Indeed, the university, more than any other institution, provides the impetus for poets to produce and to publish poems. Although literary journals and magazines rarely pay for poetry, it is a form of academic capital. For poets and writers in academia, publications win them tenure and promotions. Colleges and universities provide creative writing classes for credit, and students flock to them, often believing that they will be the next Raymond Carver or Carolyn Kizer. By juxtaposing the life of a successful poet (a thinly veiled version of herself) with the life of a poor, struggling poet, Kizer highlights what has become one of the most contentious issues in academia in the 1980s and 1990s: the astronomic increase in the number of creative writing classes offered in higher education and the overproduction of graduates from programs in creative writing, graduates who themselves are seeking jobs teaching creative writing.

Between 1975 and 1990 the number of American universities and colleges offering creative writing programs more than quadrupled, from 81 in 1975 to 328 in 1990. The number of colleges and universities offering bachelor of arts degrees in creative writing grew from 24 in 1975 to 155 in 1990. In the same period, those offering the doctorate degree, either in creative writing or in English with the option of a creative dissertation (a collection of poems, a novel, or a book of short stories), spiraled from 5 to 31, while master of fine arts programs in creative writing increased from 15 in 1975 to 50 in 1990, and master's degree programs from 32 in 1975 to 140 in 1990. In addition to the proliferation of creative writing programs, the existence of hundreds of creative writing conferences, colonies and centers, many of which were founded in the last three decades, act as material support for poets plying their trade or trying to ply their trade. Some observers of this mass production of poetry and poets refer to the phenomenon as the "Pobiz." These legions of newly-minted writers, now armed with a degree legitimating their "expertise," have created a glut on the market and a significant rise in bitterness and resentment for those who cannot secure university positions. Though the speaker in Kizer's poem never explicitly names the poet who visits her as a student or former student, her description of him is characteristic of the many who flock to such programs, hoping to make a name for themselves. He is "unknown" like the thousands of other creative writing students and would-be poetry stars who, ironically, help professional poets like Kizer establish their reputations by buying their books, showing up to their readings, and signing up for their classes. The boom in creative writing programs in the last thirty years is both cause *and* effect of the desire to achieve literary

fame, and that desire is peculiarly American. In America, the university has become the place to "credentialize" writers. Very few other countries have creative writing programs, let alone courses in poetry or fiction writing.

Another, perhaps unintended, irony of Kizer's poem is that, although she is making a comment on the elitism that exists within the literary world and the academy by addressing her poem to an "un- known" poet, in fact, almost all poets in America are unknown, even Kizer, to the general public. Critic and poet Dana Gioia aptly sums up the situation in his essay, "Can Poetry Matter?" which appeared in *The Atlantic.* In the essay, Gioia notes the obscurity in which poets toil:

American poetry now belongs to a subculture. No longer part of the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life, it has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group. Little of the frenetic activity it generates ever reaches outside that closed group. As a class poets are not without cultural status. Like priests in a town of agnostics, they still command a certain residual prestige. But as individual artists they are almost invisible.

The "residual prestige" that Gioia notes, however, does not translate into real world gain. Very few American poets have made their living through book sales alone. Even the most popular poets of the last few decades, such as John Ashbery and Allen Ginsberg, worked as university professors.

One of the bestselling living American poets today is Billy Collins, a university professor, whose book sales number in the tens of thousands□significant for poetry, but certainly not enough to make a living. Collins also has the added advantage of being a radio celebrity, something most other poets do not. The speaker of Kizer's poem is also successful, and it is her success that makes the poem so poignant, for even as she attempts to accommodate the poet who comes to visit her and obviously thinks highly of her, she cannot stop patronizing him.

It is important to point out the similarities between the events in the poem and Kizer's own life. First, the collection in which "To an Unknown Poet" appears is perhaps Kizer's most personal collection of poems, in tone and content. Though not confessional in the conventional sense of that term, the poems often incorporate events from the author's life. For example, in 1985, the year before she wrote this poem, she traveled to New York City to receive an award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, just like the speaker of "To an Unknown Poet." Also, like the speaker, Kizer has led a privileged life. Her father was a prominent lawyer, active in liberal and civic causes, and her mother a union organizer and activist. Kizer married a prominent architect, and she herself has held a number of prestigious posts, including Director of the Literature Program for the National Endowment for the Arts, Chancellor for The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and board member of the Associated Writing Programs, an umbrella organization for creative writing programs. In short, Kizer embodies the institution of creative writing, a term that increasingly is being used to replace the term "literature." It is this very institution that she caricatures in her portraits of the unknown poet and the speaker. In her fear of "breakage," her

condescending attitude, and her high self-regard, the speaker epitomizes the stodgy, conservative, privileged eastcoast literary establishment. The speaker resembles a bureaucrat more than an artist, who is simultaneously haunted and pleased by her own success.

The unknown poet is also a stereotype. The speaker compares him to Rimbaud, an icon of poetic excess, who lived a life of risk and passion. It is the latter image that many would-be poets and students are drawn to, not the former. Yet, ironically, as Kizer shows, the wild, passionate poets are not the kind who will be successful in the poetry business. They are the ones, however, who will give poetry readings that no one will attend, buy poetry books, and in general spread their enthusiasm for poetry among their friends and family.

In an article for *The Mace & Crown,* Old Dominion University's school newspaper, Diane Miller reports that Kizer opened her poetry reading there with "To an Unknown Poet." "She said she wrote it to remind her not to let her success go to her head," Miller notes. Kizer's "reminder" to herself should be mandatory reading for both established poets and for those seeking to audition for the star system of academia.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "To an Unknown Poet," in *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Corn examines the speaker of "To an Unknown Poet," finding similarities to Kizer herself, as well as a focus on inequities in life.

Among possible models for the poet's life, consider two. First, Dickinson's solitary existence spent at a writing desk in an upstairs bedroom in Amherst, the valves of her attention closed like stone; her unmarried state, her lack of interest in travel; her writerly anonymity, rejoiced in because, instead of croaking all day to an admiring bog, she could explore the inward universe of language. Second, Octavio Paz, leaving Mexico as a young man to travel in Spain and France, forming associations with progressive poets that he meets; wide and intense erotic experience, a first marriage and then a second lasting one; eventual appointment to serve as Mexico's ambassador to India; resignation from that post in response to violent government repression of a student; a return to Mexico to found one of Latin America's leading literary journals, with the inevitable result that he was called on to make frequent public appearances and comment on the state of Mexican letters and politics.

Carolyn Kizer's life as a poet resembles Paz's more than Dickinson's. She has traveled widely, to Europe, of course, but also to China and Pakistan, as a United States cultural ambassador; formed associations with dozens of contemporary poets and visual artists, edited a poetry magazine, directed the Literature Program for the NEA, married twice, and brought up three children; served as a Chancellor for the Academy of American Poets but then (along with Maxine Kumin) resigned in order to call attention to the failure of the Academy ever to name an African-American to serve in the same capacity. Part of the record of this wide spectrum of experience appears in her poems.

She probably wouldn't have been drawn to an active public life if her childhood experience had been restricted to a narrower ambit. Kizer's memoir of those years (collected in *Proses*) describes a progressive upper-middle-class household, whose doors were open to many international visitors and notables including the poet Vachel Lindsay. At an early age she took her place at the dinner table with guests and participated in discussions of current topics. No one meeting Carolyn Kizer fails to notice her social ease and self-possession, traits not common among the Hamletish brood of poets.

Skills acquired when she was a child have only been amplified in the fulfillment of public duties discharged during adulthood. Those skills include saving what she actually thinks, even when her statements aren't designed to make her listeners comfortable. It's clear that the reticence, forbearance, and self-abnegation traditionally regarded as appropriate for women hold no interest for her. She is aware of but not deterred by the risks incurred when a woman speaks with authority□one of the reasons why we find insights in her poems not found elsewhere.

Given that she has later led her life so much in company, among family, friends, and professional associates, it naturally follows that Kizer has written more than a few

poems that depict other people, a practice that sets her somewhat apart from her contemporaries. Where there is character portrayal, narrative, however brief and elliptical, must operate. Although lyric, often in "experimental" form, has been the dominant mode for poetry during the twentieth century, a few poets have maintained a narrative tradition whose origins in the West are as old as Homer. That tradition includes Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, Hardy, E. A. Robinson, and Robert Penn Warren, a roster that should justify any contemporary poet's decision to compose narratives. Carolyn Kizer doesn't write epic or novel-length poems, though a few of her poetic sequences move into the ten-page range. Narrative and plot play a role in her work, roughly as they do in short stories□which means that these verse narratives often describe and develop characters who interact with the poems' speaker. Like her early mentor Theodore Roethke, Kizer is mainly an autobiographical poet, and my sense is that characters in her work are modeled on actual persons, with an adherence to fact closer than is normal for prose fiction. Some of these characters are portraits of people that can be found in literary reference books. As such, they belong to what we might call Kizer's verse memoirs.

In this essay I won't be considering love poems or elegies. Although they obviously involve representation of other people, poems in those genres, more than the character of the beloved or the deceased, take as their subject the author's own mind. This doesn't mean that an elegy like "The Death of the Public Servant" (which appeared in *The Ungrateful Garden* and again in *The Nearness of You*) or a love poem like "The Copulating Gods" (from *Yin*) fails to describe the person it is addressed to; but physical description and psychological analysis take second place in poems like these. Meanwhile, in the more objective character poems, we sense that the author wants to compose a fable, tell a story (however concise), and make a verse portrait of the nature and actions of another person. Inevitably Kizer's own feelings come into the portrayal, otherwise she wouldn't have been spurred to write the poems. Yet the first goal of these poems is to represent another person, a psychology not her own; in order to achieve it, Kizer has had to apprentice herself to the novelists and short story writers.

If you turn the book upside down and look closely at the painting used for the cover of *The Nearness of You,* you will see a stylized, foreshortened portrait of Flaubert. Choosing that particular work for the book cover amounts to a kind of homage. In her *Paris Review* interview, Kizer comments that she has been influenced by Flaubert, saying, "I would put Flaubert first, not only the novels, but the incomparable letter he wrote to George Sand." Though she has drafted several short stories, only one has been published ("A Slight Mechanical Failure," collected in Howard Moss's *The Poet's Story*). Meanwhile, she has taken reams of notes for a projected novel without ever getting to the point of writing it. Instead, she has produced a series of poems that deal with the character and destiny of people she has known, and they are among the very best things she has written. The longest and most detailed is the poem "Gerda" (*Harping On*), which describes the Swedish-American nanny who looked after Kizer until age eight. The text of a traditional Swedish child's prayer opens the poem, prefiguring the odd, hagiographical glow that surrounds this portrait of a woman who appears to have been unusually devoted, going beyond routine domestic tasks with affectionate

extras like knitting sweaters for her young charge and sewing her a quilt. Kizer begins her narrative at a moment of crisis: Gerda trudging down the front walk with packed bags as she departs from the Kizer household. The grief-stricken eight-year-old (referred to throughout "Gerda" as "the child") cries *"Gerda, don't leave!",* her "stony mother" explaining that the decision is irrevocable. Gerda has asked to have her salary raised from twenty-five to thirty-five dollars a month and been refused. Elsewhere in her writings Kizer has provided praising portraits of her parents, but, in "Gerda," some darker touches are added:

Thirty years on, her father will remark,
Your mother was jealous
So we let her go. Of course I could have raised her wages,
Gerda ran the house! The child's throat fills with bile
As, casually, he continues: *I always let your mother*
Decide these matters. Smug, he often used that phrase
As if the abdication of his parenthood
Had been a sacrifice. What did he know
Of the child's needs or passions?

For a moment we imagine that it's jealousy concerning the child's father, but Gerda's "gray bob" and steel-rimmed spectacles work against that interpretation. Instead, the mother has become jealous of the love the child feels for her nanny and seized on the excuse of the requested pay hike to dispose of her rival. The poem never terms this decision a "betrayal," and yet the above passage establishes it as one, in word choices such as "Smug" and "abdication of parenthood" and the searing final question. Even at age thirty-eight, the narrator can say her throat "fills with bile" at this revelation, which has the power to make her revert to the earlier, vulnerable identity and again become "the child."

Kizer's narrative method in this poem is to juxtapose several time-frames in an astute montage. Near the conclusion she recounts a tragicomic moment in young adulthood when, during a train taken at age eighteen, she uses a brief layover in Minneapolis as a chance to try to re-establish contact with her lost nanny. The plan, nursed for ten years, utterly fails when she discovers that the local directory lists column after column filled with the name "Gerda Johnson." After several futile telephone calls, she must give up and resume her journey; she will never find Gerda again, a certainty she accedes to but cannot really accept. The poem's final lines shift to a second-person address, the author late in life again referring to herself as "the child" and calling for her lost caretaker:

Now from another life she summons you Out of the earth or ether, wherever you are, Gerda, come back, to nurse your desolate child. If that is true, then we can begin to understand why the poet has developed so many friendships, friendships intense enough, crucial enough, to require the memoralizing that poetry can offer. This passage implies that the early trauma of Gerda's loss has never been entirely healed. In all these relationships, Kizer hopes to rediscover some equivalent to that selfless devotion and, if

only in fragments, to retrieve it. The poem's direct address leads us to feel as readers that we, too, are being scanned for solacing remnants of the nurse's kindly nature. To refuse that appeal is to risk seeming (or being) coldhearted.

Kizer's volume *The Nearness of You* borrows a Hoagy Carmichael song title to remind us, with amused irony, that the second-person pronoun is a shortcut to an intimate tone and stance toward the character being presented. In fact, the book contains many affectionate I-to-you poems that develop portraits of writers like Robert Creeley, Ruthven Todd, and James Wright. Equally affectionate are poems spoken directly to women friends who are not artists, for example, "An American Beauty," from *Harping On.* In a few instances her feelings of solidarity with a woman friend is so strong that Kizer dispenses with either "I" and "you" and writes the whole poem in the firstperson plural. The most cheerful instances are the poems "For Jan, in Bar Maria" and "For Jan As the End Draws Near" (in *Mermaids in the Basement*). Along with the magisterial "Pro Femina," Kizer's poems to her women friends, the elegy for her mother ("The Great Blue Heron"), and the poems to her daughter ("For My Daughter" and "The Blessing") constitute her most important contribution to that growing body of work written by women in affirmation of women. *Mermaids in the Basement* went so far as to subtitle itself *Poems for Women,* which, in my opinion, is a gallant but mistaken assertion about the probable readership for the book. Even apart from its achievements in language, imagery and form, the book has a content that will engage male readers of poetry, too leaving out those indifferent to the experience of the gender that makes up more than half the world's population.

"Pro Femina," by the way, holds the distinction of containing the only poem Kizer has written in the voice of a historical personage Fanny Osbourne Stevenson, wife to the author of *Treasure Island.* (On the other hand, Kizer has written a number of poems appropriating personae from Greek mythology, in particular, "Hera, Hung from the Sky," "Persephone Pauses," and "Semele Recycled," plus a few first-person monologues like "Exodus," spoken by unnamed characters she has invented.) Originally written as an independent poem and published in *Yin,* "Fanny" was annexed to "Pro Femina" when that poem appeared again in *Mermaids in the Basement.* In the recent chapbook republication "Pro Femina" has now added yet another poem, "The Erotic Philosophers," which, who knows, may eventually prove *not* to be the poem's last section. Kizer's publishing history involves selective inclusion of some of her early poems as later volumes appeared, and so purposeful is this practice that we can regard her oeuvre as a twentieth-century counterpart to *Leaves of Grass:* fluid, open to the production and qualification of meanings lent to it in the process of recycling and expansion. The author's preface to this new edition of "Pro Femina" explains the inclusion of "Fanny" as follows:

"Fanny Stevenson, in my mind, stood for generations of women who selflessly served men fathers, sons, and lovers until their loss enabled these women to blossom as artists themselves. Before their revelation [from] their willing servitude, they found other ways of expressing themselves. In Fanny's case it was the outdoors in Samoa, digging in the earth, planting."

Whatever the origins and scope of the poem, however its meaning is altered by inclusion in the larger work, "Fanny" fully succeeds as the verse rendering of a brilliant, high-spirited character from the history of literature, whose work would be less often read today if Kizer hadn't called attention in her in this characterized monologue.

Although a number of her poems celebrate poet friends, others□among the most compelling Kizer has written□present the writer's profession in a harsh and even terrifying light. Early instances include "To a Visiting Poet in a College Dormitory" and "Promising Author" (both in *The Nearness of You*). The latter poem may or may not be a poem of failed love. Some of the details imply a brief love-affair between the narrator and the "promising author," with his "witty, gap-toothed face / Half-ruined in a dozen shore-leave brawls, / And the straw hair and softening gut / Of a beatup scarecrow out of Oz." The thirty-five lines of poem sketch out a kind of rake's progress for this straw-man of letters. He marries a rich woman, whose cushy patronage, however, quickly sours and dries up with predictable results.

You became glib as any Grub Street hack,
Then demanded help
To write the novel you never would write:
As I turned you from the door
You cursed me, and I cursed you back.

Nothing sentimental in this portrait of a conartist, this "you" briefly near and dear and then despised and repudiated, who "wept for mercy as you died." What gives the poem more force than it would otherwise have is Kizer's awareness that no bond is ever formed without affecting both parties involved, this, even if the association has to be terminated. In the *Paris Review* interview she said:

Well, I think if there's a major theme in my work, once we get past the love and loss of the early days, it is the impact of character upon character, how people rub against one another and alter one another. A poem of mine called "Twelve O'clock," which was published in *The Paris Review,* was based on that principle of Heisenberg's that you can't look at a subatomic particle without altering it. Equally you cannot meet someone for a moment, or even cast eyes on someone in the street, without changing. That is my subject.

In "Promising Author" part of the alteration□ part of the *damage* □appears in the phrase "and I cursed you back." Negative qualities in the wouldbe- writer have stirred up a current of venom in the narrator, who can't have failed to acknowledge the harm active in those feelings and those words, both to the addressee and to herself. When we speak violently to someone else, we also absorb the impact of that violence. Although the straw man portrayed in the poem wept for mercy at his death, no mercy was forthcoming, as the poem itself demonstrates. Penance for hard-heartedness in this poem takes the unusual form of self-disclosure without apology or special pleading: "He did that, and I said this, words I know to be wrong but will not conceal." A troubling feature of contemporary American poetry is the self-congratulatory tone it often takes, probably a perversion of the ringing opening line of *Song of Myself:* "I celebrate myself

and sing myself." How many thousands of poems published have pitted a noble and brilliant "I" against an evil "they" or "he" or "she" or "you." Kizer knows that life isn't that simple.

Self-inculpations can be unconscious, too, as they are in the poem "To an Unknown Poet" (from *TNOY*). Because the poem is written in the firstperson singular, with no name assigned to the speaker, we at first read it as autobiographical. Like Carolyn Kizer, the monologuist has extended herself to penniless aspiring artists; like Kizer, she has received a literary award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Finally, though, the equation is imperfect, and what we have instead is an ironic rendering of the consciousness of an "unreliable narrator," not fully aware of the implications of what she says. The poem begins, "I haven't the heart to say / you are not welcome her," and concludes with a description of the annual awards ceremony of the Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, where, at a continent's distance from the insolvent poet and his untidy children, the speaker and her artistic associates "eat and drink and congratulate each other / in this bastion of culture." Like a good novelist, Kizer renders this character as a mixture of good and bad qualities, not as a plaster saint or as a garishly painted villainess.

The poem's speaker is too honest to deny that the settled habits of middle age makes houseguests like the poet and his flock of unruly children unbearable. And yet she puts herself out for him, attending a reading that no one else attends, and according him a respect otherwise withheld from him. Though she accepts a literary award from the Academy, she registers the implicit smugness of the proceedings in lines recalling her indigent poet, a contemporary counterpart or Rimbaud, "while we eat and drink and congratulate each other / in this bastion of culture."

"Bastion of culture" is an especially damning phrase, by implication pointing the finger at those who hold shares in the corporate academy, whose very existence is posited on the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others deemed, for whatever reason, unsuitable. We might also pause to reflect on another irony at work here: Although Kizer herself has received an award like the one her speaker has been tapped for, she was not invited to become an Academy member. Just as the poem's speaker has closed her doors to the "Unknown Poet," Kizer was perhaps led to reflect that Academy doors have in turn been closed to her, even though her dossier (which includes a Pulitzer Prize) contains sufficient justification for membership when compared to that of may current Academy members. The poem asks us, then, to hold in mind two different instances of inequity. One has to do with a poet who, though deserving, doesn't earn enough money to support his family, and another who has enough income to serve briefly as his patron, though she doesn't have the forbearance or means to house him and his family permanently. She, on the other hand, is accorded only partial recognition by a cultural institution whose primary function is to honor excellence in the arts. Life isn't fair partly because people aren't fair, or not always. It's a problem without a solution, as matters stand; but irremediable woe, as Frost reminded us, is one of poetry's oldest preoccupations. I turn to one of Kizer's most recent poems, titled "Eleutheria," published in *Shenandoah* (Summer 1999) and included in *Cool, Calm, & Collected.*

The poem tells us that the title means "freedom" and that it as the name of the wife of a poet whose own name Kizer withholds. We can guess that she is giving us a fictionalized perspective on the life of James Wright and the regrettable turn his first marriage took, though some of the details have probably been altered in the interest of producing of a more coherent poem. Entirely credible, in any case, is the rendering of the title character. Kizer says, "Once he confessed to us that he had married her / Because he believed he couldn't do better, / Being plain and provincial." If this is true, he pays heavily for having underrated himself and settled for Eleutheria: She becomes that most devastating of enemies, the wife or husband who despises, denigrates, and threatens his or her spouse: "She was no fool; she knew he wanted freedom, / So she began to threaten: 'If you leave me, / You'll never see your boys again.'"

When the inevitable divorce comes, she lives up to the threat; not until they are grown does he sees his sons again. The poem suggests that this wound partly accounts for the depth and power of Wright's later poems, just as that same wound may have been connected to his increasing dependence on alcohol. Yet even *before* the divorce he drank, and "... sometimes he beat his little sons / Whom he adored, pleading for quiet / So he would have freedom to write." Careful readers will already have noticed that the word "freedom" appears in both citations above, a prompter's cue for us to consider the concept of freedom in its relationship to the story of a man who wants to write great poems, a man overworked and underpaid as a teacher of literature. A fundamental tenet of modern aesthetics is that the artist must be granted complete freedom from any sort of censorship, internal or external. On a less exalted plane, it's obvious that freedom to make any kind of art you choose is meaningless if you lack free time to do your work, freedom from the interruptions of noise, or freedom from the emotional crises erupting in a failed marriage. The protagonist of this poem wins free of some of the obstacles to artistic achievement, but, Kizer implies, at an enormous cost.

At the conclusion Kizer describes a final meeting with Eleutheria, the occasion a poetry reading given by one of Wright's sons:

Of course by then our friend was dead,
Prematurely, a victim of his hard life
And that hard woman
Who had given him his freedom.
I discovered later that Eleutheria
Had become a marriage counselor.
A marriage counselor!
Do we thank God for irony, or curse it
When it comes too close?
We are free to choose. Eleutheria.

The quality in irony we can be grateful for is laughter, even if that laughter comes only in an undertone. And the quality that we curse? Here Kizer focuses on the facts of its having "come too close" as the damnable aspect, which may mean that an ironic fate in this case is the lot of a person close to her heart, a person whose illness and premature

death saddens and angers her. Yet irony may also have come too close in another sense, a more private sense, having to do with Kizer's own fortunes as a poet. The hypothesis will have to wait until more is known about her life and its relationship to her work.

"We are free to choose," says the last line, which, in another context, might clang with the tinny accents of uplift. Here the statement forces us to reconsider whether the freedom required for poetry is worth the price. Apart from its role as the great liberating precondition to artistic achievement, "freedom" may also find part of its essence revealed in the metaphor of the cruel and destructive spouse, even when the spouse's name is not Eleutheria. It may even come to mean freedom from the bonds of earthly existence altogether Dickinson's "the privilege to die," which was invoked by several twentieth-century American poets in the form of suicide.

Carolyn Kizer, who has expended so much effort on the cause of liberation, can't be charged with a sentimental failure to grasp the risks that go with it. She is a moral poet, and by that I don't mean that she is an apologist for self-denial or prudence. Instead, her persistent concern is human character, human choice, human consequences. I'm reminded of a conversation reported to me by a Mexican friend, a poet, whose father, during a family dinner, remarked, "Freedom doesn't make men happy." My friend's mother (a Loyalist who left Spain at the end of the Spanish Civil War) answered, "No, but it makes them men." As opposed to subhuman creatures, she meant just as she intended the term "men" in this sense to apply equally to women. So be it: If freedom is an indispensable precondition for all writers who aim high, let those writers read "Eleutheria" and Kizer's other poems about poets before smashing their manacles; and let them acknowledge that serenity and contentment may not be the main result of freedom. Nevertheless, that ideal first formulated by the Greeks still glows with the promise of self-determination and the related project of artistic achievement anyway, a beacon sufficiently alluring to how many thousands of aspirants who decide to light out for the territory.

Source: Alfred Corn, "The Impact of Character on Character," in *Carolyn Kizer: Perspectives on Her Life and Work,* edited by Annie Finch, Johanna Keller, and Candace Mc- Clelland, CavanKerry Press, 2001, pp. 29-39.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Montague provides a brief introduction to Kizer as a passionately diverse, woman poet who uses her art to explore the tensions between genders and between love and loss.

Carolyn Kizer works in terms of the twinned tensions of life, those central paradoxes so directly felt by women. She poses the problem of the woman poet boldly in her remarkable "A Muse of Water":

We who must act as handmaidens
To our own goddess, turn too fast,
Trip on our hems to glimpse the muse
Gliding below her lake or sea,
Are left, long-staring after her
Narcissists by necessity...

Mother and muse, Kizer can write tenderly of her own mother, who taught her to love nature even at its most loathsome, "a whole, wild, lost, betrayed and secret life / Among its dens and burrows." Although she had a poem titled "Not Writing Poetry about Children," such poems are everywhere in her work. So are cats, symbols of the female condition, as in "A Widow in Wintertime":

trying
To live well enough alone, and not to dream
Of grappling in the snow, claws plunged in fur,
Or awaken in a caterwaul of dying.

The daring and diffidence of womanhood are celebrated in poems of companionship like "For Jan, In Bar Maria." But Kizer's most constant, resonant theme is love and loss, analyzed in detail in the sequence "A Month in Summer." The work ends with a quotation from Basho¯, and it is in the fatalism of Japanese civilization that Kizer finds a refuge and an artistic remedy for her womanly woes: "'O love long gone, it is raining in our room.' / So I memorize these lines, without salutation, without close." One of the best woman poets around, she is profoundly committed to the process of life, however painful.

The twinned tensions of male and female are explored systematically in later volumes, including *Mermaids in the Basement,* subtitled *Poems for Women,* and its complement, *The Nearness of You: Poems for Men.* Here old and new commingle, while between the works is *Yin,* which includes two wonderful autobiographical reveries, "Running Away from Home" and "Exodus." In an era when a shrill feminism threatens to tilt the scales of past injustice, Kizer's view of the sexual universe contains polarity without hostility.

With like thrift Kizer has gathered her translations in *Carrying Over.* Urdu, Macedonian, and Yiddish testify to the diversity of her interests, but there also are translations from

the great Tang poet Tu Fu, as well as of the passionate love poems of the Chinese woman poet Shu Ting, born in 1952. Old and young, past and present, ying and yang Kizer has kept faith with her interests over several decades, and she can say with Chaucer's Criseyde that "I am my owne woman, wel at ese" in the dance of the dualities.

Source: John Montague, "Kizer, Carolyn (Ashley)," in *Contemporary Poets,* 7th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 2001, pp. 641-42.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, House discusses the various stages of Kizer's poetry career.

Kizer's literary activities include founding *Poetry Northwest,* a journal she edited from its beginning in 1959 until 1965; serving as a U.S. State Department specialist in Pakistan during 1964 and 1965; and directing literary programs for the National Endowment for the Arts from 1966 to 1970. She has also been poet-in-residence at the university of North Carolina (1970-1974); Hurst Professor at Washington University, Saint Louis, Missouri (1971); acting director of the graduate writing program at Columbia University (1972); a lecturer at Barnard College in New York (1972); McGuffey Lecturer and poet-in-residence at Ohio University (1975); and a professor of poetry in the Iowa Writers Workshop (1976). In 1985 she was a senior fellow in humanities at Princeton University. At the end of "The Stories of My Life," an autobiographical section of *Proses,* Kizer confides the having experiences "war, love, marriage, separation, loneliness, children, the death of those I loved," she is now "able to say with Chaucer's Criseyde, 'I am my owne woman, wel at ese.'" The life journey that has led to this enviable state is intimately tied to Kizer's poetry and its evolving style and subject matter. In her early work Kizer treats abstract, universal topics; typical themes are tensions between humans and nature, civilization and chaos, and the perusal of defenses people raise against pain. In later years her poems have become more personal in theme but at the same time less formal in style.

No matter what her subject, though, Kizer never engages in the pettiness of which women writes have sometimes been accused: "stamping a tiny foot at God, whining in pentameter, dealing with only life's surfaces," as Roethke wrote in "Pro Femina" (part 3), Kizer emphatically rejects "the sad sonneteers, toast-and-teasdales we loved at thirteen... / when poetry wasn't a craft but a sickly effluvium" and opts rather for writing poetry which has accurately been labeled "toughminded." In a 1986 interview Kizer noted, "Self-pity is the most useless quality in the world; it destroys any poem that it touches," and, indeed, Kizer faces life's harshest realities without flinching.

Especially in her fist book, and to a lesser degree in the second, Kizer seizes upon grotesque images□lice cozily snuggling in a captured bat's wing, carrion birds devouring the last pulp of hellbound bodies□in order to test the ability of poetic form to contain terror. In later volumes she deals with more familiar landscapes, the terrors of human confrontations. In her treatments of all these unsettling topics, Kizer almost invariably maintains a tone of stoic serenity and acceptance, a philosophic stance that she has perhaps gleaned in part from her translations of oriental poetry.

The calm, almost aloof tone characteristic of Kizer's work owes itself in part of the poet's technical skills, especially her ability to use form to distance herself from pain. Particularly in her earlier poems Kizer contains her emotions by imposing on them intricate thyme schemes or complicated French and oriental verse patterns, and most often her form-giving strategies succeed. Although William Dickey complained in his November 1961 *Poetry* review of *The Ungrateful Garden* (1961) that many of Kizer's

poems "are more concerned with the manner of their expression than with the material to be expressed," most other critics have felt that Kizer uses her considerable technical gifts in ways that bring together form and substance. In the July 1961 *Saturday Review,* Robert Spector greeted Kizer as "an important new voice" and especially commended her ability to "cut savagely through all sentimental disguises."

One of the facades that Kizer most frequently explores in her first book is the assumption that humans can still be comforted by things that have traditionally given people solace. The potential sheltering abilities of government, poetry, love, and especially nature become objects of scrutiny in *The Ungrateful Garden.* In book's title poem, for example, Kizer describes the folly of Midas, who, af- ter having his eyes scorched by reflections from flowers he has turned to gold, decides that nature is evil. Similar false conclusions about nature's indifference as well as humans' supposed bonds with nature are dealt with in other poems.

One of Kizer's best-known pieces, "The Great Blue Heron," depicts nature as a concrete reality that neither cares for nor hates human beings but simply is as it is. In the first few stanzas Kizer evokes a ghostly portrait of the tattered-winged bird who first appears as a "shadow without a shadow" and then flies away on "vast unmoving wings." By the middle of the lyric she has made clear that the heron is a harbinger of death, but she never suggests that the bird is evil. As part of nature he merely reflects the cycle of life and death that time imposes on all living creatures.

Another poem, "The Intruder," emphasizes the distance between humans and nature. Here the persona's mother, feeling "instinctive love," rescues a bat from her cat's jaws. However, when she sees the "lice, pallid, yellow, / Nested within the wingpits," the woman drops her facade of sympathy and flings the wild creature back into the cat's mouth before washing "the pity from her hands."

In "The Suburbans" Kizer laments the substitution of "cardboard-sided suburbs" for the nature that inspired and comforted nineteenth-century poets. Poets now, Kizer suggests, cannot find inspiration in nature so easily. Bound to a culture in which domestic cats are all that remain of "tygers, mystery / Eye-gleam at night," the modern poet must create the animals "ancient freedom in a cage / of tidy rhyme." In the process, ultimately, poetry rather than nature becomes the writer's final subject and solace. The poet's "limited salvation" is found not in nature but in "the word."

If Kizer feels that nature neither comforts nor inspires twentieth-century people, at least she does not find birds, trees, or even bats actively threatening. Governments, on the other hand, do alarm the poet. The dangerous artificiality of modern governments is reflected in the elaborate, highly stylized villanelle form in which Kizer writes "On a Line from Julian": "I have a number, and my name is dumb. / Such a barbarian I have become!" the persona cries. Kizer shows that such plights occur because governments urge their citizens to relinquish individual identity; in a cardboard society names, the most personal of words, are replaced by mere numbers.

In "The Death of a Public Servant," another uneasy poem about government, Kizer memorializes a Canadian diplomat who committed suicide after a U.S. Senate subcommittee accused him of being a Communist. Ideally, governments should be used to create form, not destroy it. Yet the Senate's words of accusation end life for the gentle man whom Kizer implores, "Though you escape from words, whom words pursued, / take these to your shade: of rage, of grief, of love."

In contrast to the dearth of comfort Kizer finds in nature and government, poetry and human relationships do provide her with means for dealing with terror. In "Columns and Caryatids" Kizer endows three caryatids (female-shaped, edifice-supporting pillars) with powers to speak; the three roles the pillars assume□wife, mother, lover□are those through which women often form bonds with other people. The mother and lover find satisfaction in their ways of life, but the wife Kizer chooses to epitomize conjugal relationships is Lot's spouse, who, as a pillar of salt, melts away under God's derision. Even in such circumstances Lot's wife is brave, however, and ultimately all three caryatids become emblematic both of womens' strengths and of their entrapment in the responsibilities that society metes out to them.

Conflicting facets of human relationships are also found in some of Kizer's love poems. Many writers have found that sexual love creates bonds that protect and shelter, and in "What the Bones Know" Kizer seems to agree. Rejecting Marcel Proust's "wheezy," anemic ideas about love, Kizer decides "that Yeats was right / That lust and love are one." However, the poem's form, paradoxically, both casts doubt on and supports the lyric's message. Apparently Kizer is not completely at ease with sex unless its wildness is tempered with the rigidity of form, for she uses a modified sestina stanza throughout the poem. At the same time, though, the poet uses the constricting scheme of the sestina to help affirm the life-giving properties of sex. In the poem's first six-line stanza the word *death* ends the sixth line while *breath* is the last word in line five. *Breath* remains the final word in each of the three remaining stanzas, but *death* becomes in the second, third, and fourth stanzas the end world for lines four, three and two, respectively. Thus, as the persona hymns the power of sex, *death* moves farther and farther away from life and *breath.* Kizer expresses a similar ambivalence about the consoling power of sex in "A Widow in Wintertime." Here the persona sees connections between her own desires and those of her philandering cat, but this also counts as part of the discipline that makes her human the fact that she tried "not to dream / Of grappling in the snow, claws plunged in fur."

In *The Ungrateful Garden* the only consolation that Kizer shows to be invariably effective is art. Especially in the section that she labels "In the Japanese Mode," she demonstrates that poetry, unlike nature or governments, can unfailingly combat the chaos of life. One of the poems, "A Poet's Household," for example, is dedicated to Theodore Roethke, Kizer's teacher, and consists of three tankas that extol and are exemplars of the formgiving translation of experience into poetry. Similarly, in "From an Artist's House" Kizer celebrates the immutability of poetry, the fact that in the writer's hands, an old compote full of withered oranges becomes "immortal / On twenty sheets of paper."

Kizer takes the title of her second book, *Knock Upon Silence* (1965), from the *Wen Fu* of Lu Chi, a third-century Chinese poet; her translation of a key passage is quoted on the title page:

We wrestle with non-being
to force it to yield up being;
we knock upon silence
for an answering music....

A merging of Eastern and Western cultures, the music in *Knock Upon Silence* is divided into four parts: two long poems, "A Month in Summer" and "Pro Femina"; a section of Chinese imitations; and eighteen translations of Tu Fu, an eighthcentury Chinese poet. In the October 1965 *Library Journal* John Willingham asserted that Kizer "clearly... possesses one of the more impressive talents of our day." Echoing the same view, Richard Moore wrote, "This book is a rare event. One senses in it a fully developed gift in the service of an urgent and unifying perception."

The only part of Kizer's second book that critics have not unanimously praised is "A Month in Summer," a diary of a collapsing love affair recorded in a mixture of haiku and prose. While William Jay Smith argued in the August 1966 *Harper's* that this poem is the volume's best, other reviewers sided with Richard Moore, who felt the diary to be "the weakest part of the book.... It is moving in places, witty in others; but there is also a tendency to be straggling and repetitive." Some of the prose sections of "A Month in Summer" are bland, but the modified haiku are exquisite, exploring The terror of loss:

Not the grief of a wet branch
In autumn, but the absolute
Arctic desolution.

"Pro Femina," perhaps Kizer's best-known work, is a satiric poem about liberated women, especially those who are writes. The piece is written in hexameters, a meter that Kizer has said she derived from Juvenal's satires; the irony in Kizer's selection of metres becomes clear when the poet reminds us of Juvenal's misogyny, that he "set us apart in denouncing our vices / Which had grown, in part, from having been set apart."

In the poem Kizer first notes historical differences between the sexes ("While men have politely debated free will, we have howled for it / Howl still, pacing the centuries"), and then, while cautioning against overconcern with surface appearances, she concludes that women should maintain both their faces and their minds. To succeed in letters, Kizer says, women writers must "struggle abnormally," "submerge our self pity" all the while

Keeping our heads and our pride while remaining
unmarried;
And if wedded, kill guilt in its tracks when we
stack up the dishes
And defect to the typewriter. And if mothers, believe

in the luck of our children,
Whom we forbid to devour us, whom we shall not devour,
And the luck of our husbands and lovers, who keep free women.

Midnight Was My Cry: New and Selected Poems (1971) contains thirty-six of the thirty-seven poems published in *The Ungrateful Garden,* eight poems from *Knock Upon Silence,* and sixteen new poems. The book received a warm critical reception. John Willingham in the November 1971 *Library Journal* labeled it a "distinguished volume." Richard Howard in the August 1972 issue of *Poetry* praised the sixteen new poems for being "frank in their response to hope and horror alike" and for showing clear evidence of Kizer's increasing maturity.

The sixteen new poems differ in several ways from those in Kizer's two earlier books. The poet's technical elegance is as apparent in these pieces as it is in her earlier ones, but the ugly images characteristic of *The Ungrateful Garden* and *Knock*

Upon Silence are not emphasized, and Kizer's choice of subjects has altered. The concern with nature that the poet displays in the *The Ungrateful Garden* is replaced in these later poems by interest in contemporary social and national problems, particularly those of the 1960s. "Poem, Small and Delible," for example, deals with antisegregation sit-ins at Woolworth's; "The First of June Again" describes actions of American marines in Saigon; and "Seasons of Lovers and Assassins" uses blank verse to equate Robert Kennedy's murder and the "caul of vulnerability" that surrounds even those who think they have found safety in love.

Although Kizer uses new subject matter in the sixteen new poems in *Midnight Was My Cry,* she displays in them the same toic acceptance found in her earlier work. Ultimately, as she notes in the villanelle "On a Line From Sophocles," "Time, time my friend, makes havoc everywhere," both on personal and national levels. Yet even realizing this truth, she does not succumb to panic or terror or whining. Rather she summons courage similar to that which she lauds in "Lines to Accompany Flowers for Eve," a poem dedicated to a woman who has attempted to commit suicide. Life must have value, Kizer says, for the human spirit has surprising resilience even in the face of horror. Most often when people are tempted to "buy peace" by relinquishing their lives, "the spirit rouses... /... signaling / Self-amazed, its willingness to endure," for with courage it is possible to "live in wonder, /... Though once we lay and waited for death." In 1984, thirteen years after the publication of *Midnight Was My Cry,* Kizer brought out two volumes, *Yin: New Poems* and *Mermaids in the Basement: Poems for Women.* In 1986 *The Nearness of You* appeared; this book, Kizer's companion piece to *Mermaids in the Basement,* features "poems for men." While *Yin* contains only work Kizer had not previously published in book form, *Mermaids in the Basement* and *The Nearness of You* include many poems from the writer's earlier volumes.

In contrast to earlier work, Kizer's poetry from the 1980s is intimately linked to the circumstances of her life. Kizer's mother and father, particularly, as well as other family

and friends, become inspirations for and subjects of major new poems. Even the new offerings that are not openly about Kizer's family and friends are "personal" in the sense that, rather than dealing with abstractions, the poet deals with specific historical/mythical figures as they confront human problems, Also, Kizer is less concerned with formal rhyme schemes and elaborate stanzas than she had been previously.

In Chinese philosophy yin is the the female principal, supposedly the more passive, darker side of cosmic forces. In addition to "A Muse," which is the second section of *Yin,* the book has three other parts: "Believing/Unbelieving," "Dreams and Friends," and "Fanny and the Affections." "Believing/ Unbelieving" includes "Semele Recycles," a modernized version of the myth of Dionysus's mother. When Zeus appeared to her in all his glory, the original Semele promptly disintegrated; however in the "recycled" version of the myth, a stronger Semele is reunited with her lover. "The Blessing," also in this section, was written for Kizer's daughter Ashley and lovingly links and celebrates Kizer's strong mother and daughter: "Child and old woman / soothing each other, / sharing the same face / in a span of seventy years, / the same mother wit."

The third section, "Dreams and Friends," includes the poem "Antique Father," in which Kizer describes Ben Kizer during his last illness. The poet says her stern father had been successful in "Quelling all queries / of my childhood," and now, ironically, the man wishes "urgently / to communicate / to me" but cannot. Illness has robbed him of speech and imposed on him a "terrible silence," not unlike the formidable quiet he used to separate himself from the poet when she was a child.

The last section in *Yin* features "Fanny," ostensibly a diary of Fanny Osbourne Stevenson, wife of the writer Robert Louis Stevenson. Written in hexameters and alter added as a fourth section to "Pro Femina" in *Mermaids,* the piece explores the role of a wife who sacrifices herself to sustain her husband's creativity. Fanny cares for her husband in Samoa, far from the English weather that threatens his health, and in doing so she suffers trials and threats as varied as headhunters and hurricanes. The isolate woman finds her only consolation, her only creative release, ingrowing magnificent gardens.

In addition to winning the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, *Yin* received a warm critical reception. In *Poetry* (March 1985) Robert Phillips labeled *Yin* a "marvelous book" and noted "One could never say with certainty what 'a Carolyn Kizer poem' was until now. *Yin,* her fourth collection, is her most unified, original, and personal. Now we know a Kizer poem is brave, witty, passionate, and not easily forgotten." Patricia Hampl, in the November 1984 *New York Times Book Review,* also praised *Yin* and listed "A Muse" as the volume's most striking offering. Similarly, Grace Schulman, in *Poetry* (November 1985), cited "Fanny," "Semele Recycled," and "Antique Father" as poems particularly exemplifying Kizer's mature wisdom.

Mermaids in the Basement, Kizer's fifth book, takes its title from Emily Dickinson's lines "I started early□took my dog□ / And visited the Sea□ / The Mermaids in the Basement / Came out to look at me□." Divided into seven sections□"Mothers and Daughters," "Female Friends," "Pro Femina," "Chinese Love," "Myth: Visions and Revisions," "A

Month in Summer," and "Where I've Been All My Life" the collection examines various roles, personas, and incarnations that women assume.

In the *Hudson Review* (Summer 1985) Mark Jarman rightly judged that the "major service" of the publisher of *Mermaids* was "to reprint many fine [Kizer] poems that were include din now outof- print editions." "The Intruder," "The Great Blue Heron," "The Blessing," "A Widow in Wintertime," "Lines to Accompany Flowers for Eve," "Columns and Caryatids," "Semele Recycled," "A Month in Summer," and "Pro Femina" all reappear in *Mermaids.* The groupings in this volume give form to the poet's vision of yin, the feminine force. Interspersed with these reprinted pieces are several new lyrics such as "Thrall," a poem that links two scenes; in each, the focus is a room containing "a chair, a table and a father." As a child the poet felt estranged from her stern father, and in "Thrall" she remembers him as a man who "read for years without looking up / Until... childhood was over." The poem's second scene pictures the now aged father and his grown daughter, the poet. Again in a sparsely furnished room, she reads aloud to her father and waits "for his eyes to close at last / So [I]... may write this poem." In both instances the father and daughter love each other, but their relationship is tempered and muted by a similar devotion to literary pursuits.

In the preface to *The Nearness of You,* Kizer dedicates the book "For the men I love, especially John." The title is taken from a song by Hoagy Carmichael and Ned Washington. Divided into four sections□"Manhood," "Passions," "Father," and "Friends" *The Nearness of You* deals with the roles of men as viewed from Kizer's feminine perspective. One of the most revealing pieces in the "Father" section is the narrative "My Good Father."

Kizer composed the essay for a member of Ben Kizer's Study Club who wished to write a paper on her father. In her reply to the member's queries she describes her father as a supremely intelligent person and one devoted to good causes. However, he was also a self-absorbed, aloof thinking who frightened his daughter until she was thirty. Kizer summarizes her father by concluding, "To him people were chiefly important as vehicles by which he could express his passion for abstraction, abstractions for which he gaily marched into battle, chanting his war chant: truth, justice, equity, freedom and law. How he loved the law!"

The Nearness of You contains poems reprinted from earlier volumes as well as new lyrics (almost letters) dedicated to individual writers such as Robert Creeley, Robert Peterson, Ruthven Todd, Donald Keene, Bernard Malamud, Theodore Roethke, and James Wright. As this listing illustrates, Kizer has known many writers, and, indeed, she is widely esteemed as a teacher, mentor, and guide for aspiring poets. Not surprising, this role can become taxing; with wry humor Kizer titles one poem in this volume, "To An Unknown Poet." When this new writer comes "unannounced to my door / I tell you I am busy / I'm not as young as I was. / I'm terrified of breakage."

In the November 1986 *Publishers Weekly* Genevieve Stuttaford noted that the poems in *The Nearness of You* "ring joyously in the ear and the memory" and concluded, "Kizer's mastery, grace, charm and wit make this a perfect book." Somewhat less sympathetic

was Anthony Libby, who in the March 1987 *New York Times Book Review* criticized the collection but especially praised "Thrall." In the *Library Journal* (November 1986) Rochelle Ratner noted that since Kizer's poems in this volume are not dated, studying a progression of the poet's ideas and style is impossible unless the reader already knows her earlier work.

In the preface to *Carrying Over: Poems from the Chinese, Urdu, Macedonian, Yiddish, and French African* (1988), Kizer traces the history of some of the volume's translations and poems and in the process emphasizes a wish for international understanding and cooperation. Frank Allen, in the *Library Journal* (November 1988), praised Kizer's "carefully crafted translations" and said that the poet's work in *Carrying Over* "broadens our Western self-preoccupation." The collection contains translations of poems by Tu Fu, Rachel Korn, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Bogomil Gjuzel, Edouard Munick, Shu Ting, and others. The only Kizer poem in the group is "Race Relations," a piece written for her South African friend Dennis Brutus. Composed in triplets, the poem underscores Kizer's understanding of the chasm between experience and exposition. She confesses, "When you fled tyranny / face down in the street / signing stones with your blood," she was "Martyred in safety / I sighed for lost causes / You bled on You bled on."

Kizer's book *Proses: On Poems & Poets,* in addition to its collection of autobiographical pieces ("The Stories of My Life" and "So Big: An Essay on Size"), contains essays on various topics (for example, "The Poetics of Water: A Sermon," which Kizer delivered at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York) and an assortment of review and other pieces of literary criticism. Kizer's subjects are as varied as Emily Dickinson, John Claire, Robinson Jeffers, and Sylvia Plath.

Carolyn Kizer is, finally, a writer to treasure. She has created poetry that will endure; at the same time she has excelled as an inspiring teacher, insightful critic, and valued friend of the arts. In the foreword to *An Answering Music: On the Poetry of Carolyn Kizer* (1990), Hayden Carruth affirms that Kizer "wears her laurels well.... She combines the role of great ladies of the past with that of a responsibly liberated woman of the present, and does it magnificently. In her home in California she is arbiters, impresario, author, friend, succorer, facilitator." Faced with the human inevitability of loss and destruction, Kizer, in both poetry and life, celebrates the joys of art, friendship, family, and good works. Undoubtedly, she has earned a secure niche in American letters and made lasting gifts to the world's store of truth and beauty.

Source: Elizabeth B. House, "Carolyn Kizer," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vol. 169, *American Poets Since World War II, Fifth Series,* Gale Research, 1996, pp. 158-64.

Adaptations

Sound Photosynthesis has released an audiocasette titled *Carolyn Kizer: Reading Her Poetry.* Tapes can be ordered by writing to Sound Photosynthesis, P. O. Box 2111, Mill Valley, CA 94942-2111.

In 1977, The Writer's Center released the audiocassette *An Ear to the Earth,* which compiles two public readings by Kizer. Cassettes can be purchased by writing to The Writer's Center, 4508 Walsh Street, Bethesda MD, 20815-6006.

Topics for Further Study

Compare the attitude of the speaker in "To an Unknown Poet" with the attitude of the speaker in "Promising Author," a poem which is also in *The Nearness of You.* Write a short essay exploring what the two poems tell you about the nature of competition in the literary world.

Rewrite Kizer's poem from the point of view of the unknown poet, and then read the poem to your class. After the reading, explain the choices you made in rewriting the poem.

Over the course of the semester, go to at least three poetry readings in your area. You can find listings for readings in your local paper or the paper for the local college or university. Evaluate the readings in terms of the quality of the work read, the reading ability of the poet, and the atmosphere of the place. Present your findings to the class.

Two popular publications for poets and writers are *AWP Chronicle* and *Poets & Writers.* Review a copy of each publication at your local library or bookstore (you can also find them on the World Wide Web), taking notes on how they characterize literary culture. Share your findings with the class.

Kizer mentions Rimbaud, a French poet, near the end of her poem. Find a copy of Rimbaud's poem, "The Drunken Boat," and read it to your class. Next, read one of Kizer's poems to the class. Discuss the differences in tone, word choice, and worldview between the two poems.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, and Bob Perleman criticize academic poets and poetics, arguing for a new kind of poetry that would foreground language's materiality and be more political and experimental. They came to be known as "language poets."

Today: Bernstein and Perleman, and many others associated with the language school of writing, teach in universities and colleges.

1980s: The *Los Angeles Times* announces that it will review fewer books of poetry, and many critics begin penning essays announcing that poetry in America is dead.

Today: Many of the same arguments regarding the irrelevance of poetry that were heard in the 1980s continue to be heard today. Meanwhile, creative writing programs across the country confer degrees in creative writing to an increasing number of graduates.

1980s: Kizer wins the Pulitzer Prize for her collection, *Yin: New Poems* and an award from The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

Today: In 1998, Kizer and Maxine Kumin resign from the board of chancellors at the Academy of American Poets, claiming there is a lack of women and minorities on the board and in the ranks of poets to whom the board awards prizes.

What Do I Read Next?

Walter B. Kalaidjian's *Languages of Liberation* (1989), explores the economics behind book publishing and reputation-making in the poetry world. It is an indispensable resource for those who remain mystified by why one writer is popular and another one is not.

Kizer has edited a well-received anthology, *100 Great Poems by Women* (1995), which showcases both more-established and newer poets. One of Kizer's desires is to show the range of subject matter that women address.

Kizer's collection *Yin: New Poems* (1984) won the Pulitzer Prize and helped to establish BOA Editions, the press that published it.

Simon Worrall's novel *The Poet and the Murderer: A True Story of Literary Crime and the Art of Forgery* (2002) features the forgery of an Emily Dickinson poem and how the discovery of that forgery leads to two people's deaths.

Further Study

Barbato, Joseph, "Carolyn Kizer: Pulitzer Poet," in *Small Press,* Vol. 3, No. 2, November-December 1985, pp. 54-58.

Barbato profiles Kizer's career and rise to fame.

Howard, Richard, "Our Masks Keep Us Enthralled to Ourselves," in *Alone with America,* Atheneum, 1980, 320-30.

Howard offers an enlightening essay on the role of gender in Kizer's poetry.

Kizer, Carolyn, *Proses: On Poems & Poets,* Copper Canyon Press, 1993.

In the first section of this collection of essays, Kizer writes extensively about her childhood and how she became interested in poetry.

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Kizer, Carolyn, "To an Unknown Poet," in *The Nearness of You,* Copper Canyon Press, 1986, pp. 90-91.

Libby, Anthony, "Fathers and Daughers and Mothers and Poets," in the *New York Times Book Review,* March 22, 1987, p. 23.

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Miller, Diane, "ODU hosts Pulitzer Prize Winner," in the *Mace & Crown,* October 17, 1985.

Quinn, Sister Bernetta, "Carolyn Kizer, Poet of Compassion," in *An Answering Music: On the Poetry of Carolyn Kizer,* edited by David Rigsbee, Ford-Brown, 1990, pp. 172-85.

Wakoski, Diane, Review of *The Nearness of You,* in *Women's Review of Books,* September 1987, p. 6.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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