Tonight I Can Write Study Guide

Tonight I Can Write by Pablo Neruda

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Tonight I Can Write" was published in 1924 in a collection of poems by Pablo Neruda titled *Veinte poemas de amor y una cancion desesperada*. The collection was translated into English in 1969 by W. S. Merwin as *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. Although some reviewers were shocked by the explicit sexuality in the poems, the collection became a best seller and was translated into several languages. Marjorie Agosin writes in her article on Neruda, "One of the reasons that *Twenty Love Poems* draws the reader so powerfully is the sobriety of expression and the economy of the images." René de Costa in his article on Neruda notes that all the poems in this collection contain "a highly charged confessional intimacy that challenged and charmed the sensibility of its reader, creating in the process a contemporary *stil nuovo* which continues to resonate in the language of love." The poems chart a love story from the initial infatuation to the release of passion, and finally to a separation. "Tonight I Can Write," the penultimate poem in the poetic sequence, expresses the pain the speaker feels after losing his lover. The bittersweet sentiment recalls their passionate relationship and his recognition that "love is so short, forgetting is so long."

Author Biography

Pablo Neruda was born Ricardo Eliezer Neftali Reyes y Basoalto on July 12, 1904, in the agricultural region of Parral, Chile. His father Jose del Carmen Reyes Morales, a railroad worker, soon relocated his family to Temuco, a frontier settlement in southern Chile. As a teenager he received encouragement from one of his teachers, the poet Gabriela Mistral, who would later win a Nobel Prize. Manuel Duran and Margery Safir in *Earth Tones: The Poetry of Pablo Neruda* note, "It is almost inconceivable that two such gifted poets should find each other in such an unlikely spot. Mistral recognized the young Neftali's talent and encouraged it by giving the boy books and the support he lacked at home." This support helped him find the confidence to write poetry and at fourteen to change his name legally to Pablo Neruda. During high school he published poems in local papers and won literary competitions. In the early 1920s he attended Instituto Pedagogico in Santiago, Chile, and in 1926, the University of Chile. His first collection of poetry, *La cancion de la fiesta*, was published in Chile in 1921. He followed that volume with two more: *Crepusculario* in 1923 and *Veinte poemas de amor y una cancion desesperada* in 1924. The latter collection, which includes his poem "Tonight I Can Write," became a popular success in Latin America and was translated in 1969 as *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair.*

Poem Text

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.
Write, for example, 'The night is starry
and the stars are blue and shiver in the distance.'
The night wind revolves in the sky and sings.
Tonight I can write the saddest lines.
I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too.
Through nights like this one I held her in my arms.
I kissed her again and again under the endless sky.
She loved me, sometimes I loved her too.
How could one not have loved her great still eyes.
Tonight I can write the saddest lines.
To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her.
To hear the immense night, still more immense without her.
And the verse falls to the soul like dew to the pasture.
What does it matter that my love could not keep her.
The night is starry and she is not with me.
This is all. In the distance someone is singing. In the distance.
My soul is not satisfied that it has lost her.
My sight tries to find her as though to bring her closer.
My heart looks for her, and she is not with me.
The same night whitening the same trees.
We, of that time, are no longer the same.
I no longer love her, that's certain, but how I loved her.
My voice tried to find the wind to touch her hearing.
Another's. She will be another's. As she was before my kisses.
Her voice, her bright body. Her infinite eyes.
I no longer love her, that's certain, but maybe I love her.
Love is so short, forgetting is so long.
Because through nights like this one I held her in my arms
my soul is not satisfied that it has lost her.
Though this be the last pain that she makes me suffer
and these the last verses that I write for her.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4:

The theme of distance is introduced in the opening line. When the speaker informs the reader, "Tonight I can write the saddest lines," he suggests that he could not previously. We later learn that his overwhelming sorrow over a lost lover has prevented him from writing about their relationship and its demise. The speaker's constant juxtaposition of past and present illustrate his inability to come to terms with his present isolated state. Neruda's language here, as in the rest of the poem, is simple and to the point, suggesting the sincerity of the speaker's emotions. The sense of distance is again addressed in the second and third lines as he notes the stars shivering "in the distance." These lines also contain images of nature, which will become a central link to his memories and to his present state. The speaker contemplates the natural world, focusing on those aspects of it that remind him of his lost love and the cosmic nature of their relationship. He begins writing at night, a time when darkness will match his mood. The night sky filled with stars offers him no comfort since they "are blue and shiver." Their distance from him reinforces the fact that he is alone. However, he can appreciate the night wind that "sings" as his verses will, describing the woman he loved.

Lines 5-10:

Neruda repeats the first line in the fifth and follows it with a declaration of the speaker's love for an unnamed woman. The staggered repetitions Neruda employs throughout the poem provide thematic unity. The speaker introduces the first detail of their relationship and points to a possible reason for its demise when he admits "sometimes she loved me too." He then reminisces about being with her in "nights like this one." The juxtaposition of nights from the past with this night reveals the change that has taken place, reinforcing his sense of aloneness. In this section, Neruda links the speaker's lover with nature, a technique he will use throughout the poem to describe the sensual nature of their relationship. In the eighth line, the speaker remembers kissing his love "again and again under the endless sky"—a sky as endless as, he had hoped, their relationship would be. An ironic reversal of line six occurs in line nine when the speaker states, "She loved me, sometimes I loved her too." The speaker may be offering a cynical statement of the fickle nature of love at this point. However, the eloquent, bittersweet lines that follow suggest that in this line he is trying to distance himself from the memory of his love for her and so ease his suffering. Immediately, in the next line he contradicts himself when he admits, "How could one not have loved her great still eyes." The poem's contradictions create a tension that reflects the speaker's desperate attempts to forget the past.

Lines 11-14:

In line eleven Neruda again repeats his opening line, which becomes a plaintive refrain. The repetition of that line shows how the speaker is struggling to maintain distance, to convince himself that enough time has passed for him to have the strength to think about his lost love. But these lines are "the saddest." He cannot yet escape the pain of remembering. It becomes almost unbearable "to think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her." His loneliness is reinforced by "the immense night, still more immense without her." Yet the poetry that he creates helps replenish his soul, "like dew to the pasture."

Lines 15-18:

In line fifteen the speaker refuses to analyze their relationship. What is important to him is that "the night is starry and she is not with me" as she used to be on similar starry nights. "This is all" that is now central to him. When the speaker hears someone singing in the distance and repeats "in the distance," he reinforces the fact that he is alone. No one is singing to him. As a result, he admits "my soul is not satisfied."

Lines 19-26:

In these lines the speaker expresses his longing to reunite with his love. His sight and his heart try to find her, but he notes, "she is not with me." He again remembers that this night is so similar to the ones they shared together. Yet he understands that they "are no longer the same." He declares that he no longer loves her, "that's certain," in an effort to relieve his pain, and admits he loved her greatly in the past. Again linking their relationship to nature, he explains that he had "tried to find the wind to touch her hearing" but failed. Now he must face the fact that "she will be another's." He remembers her "bright" body that he knows will be touched by another and her "infinite eyes" that will look upon a new lover.

Lines 27-32:

The speaker reiterates, "I no longer love her, that's certain," but immediately contradicts himself, uncovering his efforts at self deception when he admits, "but maybe I love her." With a world-weary tone of resignation, he concludes, "love is so short, forgetting is so long." His poem has become a painful exercise in forgetting. In line twenty-nine he explains that because this night is so similar to the nights in his memory when he held her in his arms, he cannot forget. Thus he repeats, "my soul is not satisfied." In the final two lines, however, the speaker is determined to erase the memory of her and so ease his pain, insisting that his verses (this poem) will be "the last verses that I write for her."

Themes

Memory and Reminiscence

"Tonight I Can Write" is a poem about memories of a lost love and the pain they can cause. Throughout the poem the speaker recalls the details of a relationship that is now broken. He continually juxtaposes images of the passion he felt for the woman he loved with the loneliness he experiences in the present. He is now at some distance from the relationship and so acknowledges, "tonight I can write the saddest lines," suggesting that the pain he suffered after losing his lover had previously prevented any reminiscences or descriptions of it. While the pain he experienced had blocked his creative energies in the past, he is now able to write about their relationship and find some comfort in "the verse [that] falls to the soul like dew to the pasture."

Love and Passion

Throughout the poem, the speaker expresses his great love for a woman with whom he had a passionate romance. He remembers physical details: "her great still eyes," "her voice, her bright body," "her infinite eyes." He also remembers kissing her "again and again under the endless sky" admitting "how I loved her." His love for her is still evident even though he states twice "I no longer love her, that's certain." The remembrance of their love is still too painful to allow him to admit the depth of his love for her, especially when he thinks, "Another's. She will be another's. As she was before my kisses," imagining her "bright body" under someone else's caress.

Physical and Spiritual

Neruda employs nature imagery to suggest the speaker's conception of the spiritual nature of his relationship with his lover. When he describes them kissing "again and again under the endless sky," he describes his physical relationship with her in cosmic terms. He also uses this type of imagery to describe his lover, creating a connection between her and nature. "Traditionally," states René de Costa in *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, "love poetry has equated woman with nature. Neruda took this established mode of comparison and raised it to a cosmic level, making woman into a veritable force of the universe." The speaker compares his lover's "great still" and "infinite eyes" to the "endless sky." He also uses nature to communicate his love for her. His voice tries "to find the wind to touch her hearing."

Alienation and Loneliness

The speaker juxtaposes memories of his passionate relationship with his lover with his present state of alienation and loneliness without her. The speaker employs the imagery of nature to reflect his internal state. He writes his "saddest lines" on a night that is

similar to the nights he spent with his lover. Yet the darkness and the stars that "shiver at a distance" in this night suggest his loneliness. The "immense night" becomes "still more immense without her," especially when he notes, "to think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her." He compounds his suffering when he remembers "nights like this one" when he held her in his arms.

The speaker expresses his loneliness when he notes that he hears someone in the distance singing and repeats, "in the distance." No one now sings for him. He admits, "my sight tries to find her as though to bring her closer," and "my heart looks for her, and she is not with me." As a result, his "soul is not satisfied. In an effort to assuage the loneliness he feels, he tries to convince himself, "I no longer love her, that's certain," but then later acknowledges, "maybe I love her." With a worldweary tone of resignation, he concludes, "love is so short, forgetting is so long." Determined to end his sense of alienation and loneliness, the speaker insists that these will be "the last verses that I write for her."

Style

Neruda uses nature imagery in "Tonight I Can Write" when he describes his lost love and their relationship. When the speaker describes the "endless sky" and his love's "infinite eyes," he suggests that their relationship achieved a cosmic level. Neruda also uses images of nature to illustrate the speaker's state of mind. When he writes of the stars that are "blue and shiver in the distance" he suggests the distance that has formed between the lovers and the coldness of the speaker's isolation.

Historical Context

Latin American Literature

After World War I, Latin American writers began to gain international recognition. As a result, these writers started to shift the focus in their works from regional preoccupations to more universal themes. They also experimented with new literary forms. Modernism, especially had an impact on Latin American poets. Love, the family, and social protest became popular subjects, especially with the Uruguayans Delmira Agustini and Juana de Ibarbourou and the Chileans Mistral and Neruda.

Marisol and Marisombra

Neruda has admitted that the poems in *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* were inspired by his relationships with two women during his student years in Santiago. Two distinct women emerge in the poems in this collection—a mysterious girl in a beret and another young woman. Although he does not identify the women by name in the poems, later in an interview he referred to them as Marisol and Marisombra. The posthumous publication of his letters in 1974 revealed the girl in the beret to be Albertina Azocar, the sister of his close friend Ruben Azocar.

Literary Censorship

Chiles leading publisher refused to publish *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* because of its blatant eroticism. When the collection was eventually published, many readers were scandalized by the sexually explicit imagery. Political and literary censorship has existed in some form since the beginning of civilization. Censorship has existed in the United States since the colonial period, but over the years the emphasis has shifted from political to literary. Prior to 1930, literary classics like James Joyces' *Ulysses* were not allowed entry into the United States on grounds of obscenity. Other works, like D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterleys Lover*, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, and John Cleland's *Fanny Hill*, won admittance into the United States only after court fights. In 1957 the Supreme Court began a series of decisions that would relax restrictions on obscene literature. In 1973, however, the Supreme Court granted individual states the right to determine what was obscene.

Critical Overview

"Tonight I Can Write" was published in 1924 in a collection of Pablo Neruda's poetry, *Veinte poemas de amor y una cancion desesperada* and translated into English in 1969 by Merwin as *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. Although Chile's leading publisher turned down the collection, arguing that the poems were too erotic, the public response was overwhelmingly positive. Over the years, the collection has been translated into several languages. *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* established his reputation as a promising new poet. In his article "Pablo Neruda: Overview," de Costa notes that the book was a "*succès de scandale*" when it first appeared in 1924. Judged to be shamelessly erotic and faulted for its bold departure in form and style from the genteel tradition of Hispanic lyricism the book went on to become something of a bestseller, and remains so today." Robert Clemens remarks in the *Saturday Review* that the collection "established [Neruda] at the outset as a frank, sensuous spokesman for love." George D. Schade in his article on Neruda praises the author's prodigious literary achievements and notes that none of his work has compared "in immediate popularity and continuing success with his first significant book, *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair.*

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Wendy Perkins is an Associate Professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland. In the following essay, she examines Neruda's use of nature imagery in "Tonight I Can Write" to illustrate the poem's dominant themes.

Nature has played a large role in literature, especially poetry, since the Medieval age. Poets employ the images of nature for several purposes: to express childlike delight in the sense of freedom it affords, as a background to or reflection of human actions or emotions, to express a sense of the infinite, to symbolize the human spirit, or to describe nature for its own sake. References to a sense of awe in the face of an often hostile nature appear in the Medieval age in *Beowulf* while Chaucer tended to create idyllic natural settings for his tales. The Elizabethans' pastorals and sonnets used images in nature to provide appropriate settings to dramatic situations and human emotions. Neoclassicists employed descriptions of natural settings as a basis for philosophical reflections. Nature became the primary subject for the Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge who turned to the natural world as a respite from society and culture and as a more appropriate guide to spiritual concerns. Often, these poets found a wilder, more disordered natural world than did their predecessors, which became a more apt setting for their ruminations on the wilder, more disordered nature of human experience. Chilean poet Pablo Neruda adopted a Romantic vision in the twentieth century in "Tonight I Can Write" in his use of nature as reflection of the spiritual and emotional. Yet in this poem, Neruda's use of nature becomes more complex. In the speaker's lyrical evocations of his relationship with the woman he has loved and lost, he and the woman become almost indistinguishable from nature. The lovers' passion and despair thus transcend the human and achieve the cosmic.

Manuel Duran and Margery Safir in their *Earth Tones: The Poetry of Pablo Neruda* note that in all the poetry in Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* "nature does not enter for itself alone, but rather nature and woman are seen as two aspects of the same reality. The beauty and strength—and mystery, at times terror—of nature and the beauty, strength, and mystery of woman are but mirrors of one another. In *Twenty Poems* nostalgia, love of nature, and love of woman are united in a single strand and nowhere do we find the detached contemplation of nature itself." Marjorie Agosin, in her book on Neruda, comments, "The image of the woman takes on a transcendental importance in [*Twenty Poems*], for she is associated with the elements and the earth. She is the earth mother, a notion established by the romantic poets of the last century, but which Neruda makes more immediate and secular Woman, who plays with the world and resembles that world elevated to a cosmic level, is cast in images of the surrounding natural landscape—sky, water, earth." In "Tonight I Can Write" the speaker fuses the spiritual beauty of nature with that of the woman he loved. Her "great still" and "infinite eyes," that no one could help but love, become the "immense night." The natural setting also blends with the delight they experienced in each other. Their passion shone like the "starry night." The speaker notes, "Through nights like this one I held her in my arms. / I kissed her again and again under the endless sky." The sky was as endless as their passion. Her mystery, however, is also reflected in natural images.

She and the stars are distant on the night the speaker gains the strength to remember and to express through verse his passionate love for her and the pain he has suffered without her. In this monologue, the woman is absent and their love distant, which makes the sincerity of his emotion more poignant. The speaker seems unsure about why the relationship failed. All he has is a sense that "sometimes" she loved him too.

Neruda also fuses images of nature with the speaker's emotional state in the poem's present. The dark night matches the dark night of his soul as he thinks about "nights like this one" when he held her in his arms. He hears "the immense night, still more immense without her." The juxtaposition of past and present nights reveals the change that has taken place, reinforcing his sense of aloneness. He admits tonight is "the same night whitening the same trees," yet "we, of that time, are no longer the same." Neruda embraces the entirety of nature when he focuses attention on the night sky. When the speaker laments, "the night is starry and she is not with me," sky and earth merge, encompassing his loneliness. The speaker and the stars "shiver in the distance" that separates them from the loved one. Also "in the distance some one is singing. In the distance" not to him. Yet ironically it is that distance that allows the speaker the strength to return finally to the past and express his memories of it, for only now can he write "the saddest lines." In his juxtapositions of past and present, his struggle with his emotions and sense of isolation sometimes becomes overwhelming, as when he acknowledges, "my soul is not satisfied that it has lost her." Agosin comments that in *Twenty Poems* "dialogue does not exist, for this is a collection of monologues where desperation, alienation, and the obsessive need to obliterate loneliness constantly seep through." Neruda's language in "Tonight I Can Write" is direct and concise, suggesting the sincerity of the speaker's emotions. He hopes that the act of remembering and envisioning their love through the poem will alleviate his sense of alienation. "The night wind revolves in the sky and sings" as he hopes his poem will. Later he admits that his "verse falls to the soul like dew to the pasture." He concludes, however, "my voice tried to find the wind to touch her hearing" but could not.

On this night the speaker expresses his sorrow over his inability to hold onto his relationship with his lover. He declares, "My sight tries to find her as though to bring her closer. / My heart looks for her, and she is not with me." In an effort to cope with his loneliness, he tries repeatedly to convince himself that he no longer loves her; "that's certain." But his sensuous descriptions of the night and his love belie his efforts. Ultimately he admits on this night, remembering "nights like this one" when he held her in his arms, "love is so short, forgetting is so long."

Agosin describes *Twenty Poems* as "a book celebrating the unforgettable sentiment of first love, which examines afresh the first stirrings of happiness and lucklessness. Even after the shipwreck, the amorous sentiment survives through the power of language that is integrated with nature." In "Tonight I Can Write" Neruda fuses the images of nature with "the unforgettable sentiment of first love" and so creates a moving, lyrical evocation of its passion and agony.

Source: Wendy Perkins, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Rader has published widely in the field of American and Latin American art and literature. In this essay, Rader explores the ways in which Neruda's famous poem both exemplifies and eludes classification as a modernist text.

There may be no more beloved poem in all of Latin America than Pablo Neruda's beguiling poem "Tonight I Can Write." Written when Neruda was in his very early twenties, the poem perfectly captures the paradoxical emotions of recently lost love. On some level, this poem absolutely resists interpretation and analysis—it is so simple, so direct, so honest, that there is very little to unpack. Indeed, few students have difficulty understanding the poem, and few critics have made it the focus of their critical attention. The poem's language is accessible, and unlike many modernist texts, it explores emotions that every reader can relate to. Instead of offering a reading of the poem itself, this essay will discuss the ways in which Neruda's poem is profoundly unique for the era in which it was written. "Tonight I Can Write" both embodies many characteristics of modernism, the literary movement of which it is part, and eschews the typical conventions of the modernist poem. The fact that Neruda's poem both participates in and refuses to participate in expected conventions of modernist aesthetics, grounds it in the temporal milieu of an era yet imbues it with a sense of timelessness. At once, the text feels shockingly unpoetic *and* overwhelming so. The "confusion" in the poem, its paradoxical nature, mirrors the confusion within the speaker of the poem and his own paradoxical stances on the woman who has left him. The poem succeeds because it, like love, like human emotion, cannot be quantified, classified or confined poem. In other words, "Tonight I Can Write" reflects High Modernist principles while simultaneously transgressing them.

To be sure, Neruda's poem offers up for examination many of the most important characteristics underpinning the modernist lyric poem. For instance, the very genesis of the poem itself is utterly modernist in that the poem arises out of absence. One of the classic motifs of modernism is the presence of absence; that is, the realization that absence can become a palpable presence. Rainer Maria Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," Wallace Stevens' "Snow Man," William Carlos Williams' "This Is Just To Say," and T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" all create a landscape in which the absence of a head or plums or life itself morphs into a disturbing presence. In Neruda's poem, the text's very presence is contingent on the absence of the woman in question. If she and the poet were still together, there would be no need for such a poem. Indeed, Neruda spends the entire poem reminding us of the woman's absence. As is the case in the poems mentioned above, the poem ultimately becomes a proxy for what is missing; thus, the poem becomes a stand-in, the presence needed to fill the void. But, at the same time, we are always aware that, in fact, there is a void.

If modernist writers feel anything, it's alienation; hence, alienation has come to be one of the key concepts associated with modernism. Because of the increased urbanization of the west, the advent of telephones and radio, the residual fragmentation following World War I and the popularity of Freudian, Darwinian and Nietzschean thought, individuals,

particularly artists, felt themselves alienated from the rest of society. In works like James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening," H. D.'s "Eurydice," Stevens's "Sunday Morning," Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, and Yeats' "The Second Coming," an individual muses over his or her estrangement from either another person or society at large. In "Tonight I Can Write," Neruda establishes the ubiquitous alienation of the individual, a trope he will elaborate on in his *Residencia en la Tierra* books. Not only is the speaker alienated from his love, but so is he divorced from nature, which is itself inscribed with her absence: "To hear the immense night still more immense without her □ The night is starry and she is not with me." Though the writer doesn't seem to enjoy experiencing feelings of alienation, almost always it is the genesis for art. The writer uses his text as a means of connection and exchange otherwise unavailable to him. Neruda's poem is no different here, though he uses the medium of poetry to convince himself that his isolation is not only temporary but an occasion to write the "saddest" lines possible.

One last way in which "Tonight I Can Write" embodies some basic tenets of modernism is through its autotelism (the belief that a work of art is an end in itself or its own justification). For better or worse, many modernist texts do not signify outside themselves. They are their own ends. Postmodern critics often criticize modernism because work produced during this period tends to apotheosize art and ignore the world and its problems. When Gabriel in Joyce's short story "The Dead" claims that literature is above politics, he defines the view of a generation of writers. Later in his life, Neruda will completely reverse his stance, but in these early poems, the alpha and omega of poetry is the poem itself. Political concerns, cultural criticisms, economic warnings do not enter the poems at all. For many, there was no world outside of the text; indeed, for the speaker of the poem, there is no world outside of his emotional sphere. The obsessions, anxieties and desires of the individual almost always take precedence over the concerns of society, and while "Tonight I Can Write" does engage common private emotions, it does not necessarily engage larger public interests.

More interesting than exploring how "Tonight I Can Write" recoups modernism is examining how it eludes it. One refreshing distinction of the poem lies in its sincerity. High Modernism is not known for its honesty. On the contrary, most modernist poetic texts feature a prominent persona and emphasize a distanced irony or a diminished emotional landscape. Not so with Neruda. According to René de Costa, this attribute lends the poem a salient uniqueness: "The poem's effectiveness, the reader's empathy with the sincerity of the poetic voice, derives from the fact that this is a composition unlike any other." Compare, for example, the voice of J. Alfred Prufrock with the voice of the speaker of this poem. Both poems attend to complex emotions surrounding romance and love, but Neruda's is clearly more vulnerable. The distance between the poetic persona and the author is indistinguishable in Neruda (even more so than in a poet like Walt Whitman), whereas for Eliot, Pound and even Stevens and Williams, that is simply not the case.

Without question, Neruda was ahead of his time. In fact, in this poem and in others, he predicts certain aspects of postmodernism, most notably questions of textuality and referentiality. "Tonight I Can Write" is utterly aware of itself as a poem. It refers to its own

poem-ness, it's own composition. It repeatedly refers to itself as a poem in progress, not a finished piece. For the New Critics, the ideal poem is a "well-wrought urn," an object d'art that is isolated, untouchable, perfect, flawless. Rarely will one find a modernist poem that not only mentions its own textuality but celebrates it. In other words, while we are reading this poem, we are always aware that we are reading a poem, unlike "Prufrock," which is a kind of confession, or "In the Station of the Metro," which works like a photograph. For Neruda, the poem is never a product, always a process.

Perhaps the most important way in which "Tonight I Can Write" averts the modernist impulse lies in its form. As mentioned above, the desired poem for most High Modernists and most New Critics is one that is clearly "made." In poems by Pound or Stevens or Eliot or Hart Crane, one encounters some very difficult language and archaic allusions. Often, the tone is lofty, reverent, even scholarly. Such is the case in Eliot's "The Wasteland" or Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly." But in Neruda's poem, his language is downright conversational. The poem is contradictory, and at times the speaker seems unsure of his emotions. In fact, the poem feels more like a journal entry than a finished art object. "Neruda has employed here a rhetoric that is not conventionally poetic," argues de Costa. He goes on to contextualize Neruda's text with preconceived notions of what a good poem might be: "The staggered repetitions, the poetic syntax, the irregularity of the temporal exposition are distinctive features to be sure, but features not normally found in 'good poetry.'" For de Costa, Neruda's determination to write against poetic tradition gives the poem it's appeal. Some readers would agree. To express such common and such strong emotions without succumbing to cliché or sentiment or cloying language is an amazing achievement.

There may be no more poignant statement on lost love than "Tonight I Can Write," and, paradoxically, there may be no more accessible statement either. However, this paradox should not deter the reader; in fact, this paradox simply reflects the motif of contradictions inherent in human relationships and, for that matter, in all good poetry.

Source: Dean Rader, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Saunders teaches writing and literature in the Myrtle Beach, South Carolina area and has published six chapbooks of poetry. In the following essay, Saunders contends that "Tonight I Can Write" is a powerful lament for a lost lover that gains strength because of Pablo Neruda's ability to control his vivid imagination and express his turbulent emotional state with the utmost sincerity, simplicity, honesty, and directness.

Pablo Neruda's "Puedo Escribir Los Versos" ("Tonight I Can Write") has long stood the test of time as arguably the best poem in *Veinte Poemas de Amor y una Cancion Desesperada (Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair)* (1924), which has been called "one of the finest books of verse in the Spanish language." For English readers, moreover, the 1969 translation of this poem by W. S. Merwin, one of America's foremost poet-translators of the past fifty years, comes as an added boon, for Merwin captures beautifully—and faithfully—the poem's musical and emotional nuances. In Merwin's translation, one experiences the full cathartic brunt of Neruda's complex, and even contradictory, feelings toward the loved one that he "could not keep."

As the culmination of a score of poems that alternate between unbridled joy and overpowering sadness, "Tonight I Can Write" (known hereafter in this essay as "Poem XX," per Neruda's numerical sequencing) struggles to express the inexpressible, to articulate, in the most sincere and direct way possible, Neruda's lyrical cry of the heart over the fact that he and his lover are no longer together. Deeply personal yet piercingly universal, "Poem XX" derives much of its power from the naked, unadorned simplicity of expression that propels the poem forward. The poem is less ornate in imagery than those preceding it in the *Twenty Love Poems* sequence, almost as if Neruda understood implicitly that the denser, more heavily metaphorical and descriptive language of the preceding poems would no longer suffice in verbalizing the raw, intense emotional state he found himself in at the time of the composition of "Poem XX." In essence, "Poem XX" cuts to the core of the matter in a way no other poem in *Twenty Love Poems* does.

Operating in a "less is more" vein, "Poem XX" actually derives more emotional power from its earthy directness and sparseness of descriptive adjectives than a more elaborate verbal treatment would have. As noted by Manuel Duran and Margery Safir in *Earth Tones*, their probing exploration of Neruda and his poetry, "[v]ery few words in *Twenty Poems* would not be found on a list of the two thousand most frequently used words in the Spanish language," and this observation is particularly true of "Poem XX," with its emphasis on such simple yet highly connotative nouns as "night," "wind," "soul," and "love." Neruda, in this poem, seems to be striving for an absolute purity of expression in which words fall "to the soul like dew to the pasture," to quote one of the poem's more powerful figures of speech. In a desire to approximate the crystalline purity of dewdrops on grass, Neruda keeps the nouns short, sweet, and largely free of adjectives and other modifiers. "The adjective is the enemy of the noun," wrote Voltaire, and though Neruda may not have been aware of this quote at the time, subconsiously he seems to have composed "Poem XX" with the goal of paring down the language to the bare essentials. Indeed, such a raw, naked cry of sadness and loss, the kind that

informs "Poem XX," can only achieve its full effect with rigorous attention toward eliminating any surface pyrotechnics that may please the reader's eye but interfere with the poem's passionate outcry.

Be that as it may, Neruda does not suppress his powerful imagination entirely in "Poem XX," although it is relatively subdued here when compared to the other poems in the collection. Vivid imagery and scintillant figures of speech are still on display in "Poem XX," albeit in a less densely packed arrangement. Aside from the aforementioned brilliant simile in line 14, there are a number of striking metaphors throughout the poem, all of which synthesize Neruda's heightened emotional state with the natural world. Almost immediately, in lines 2-3, the reader encounters a wonderfully ambiguous and resonant image: "'The night is shattered / and the blue stars shiver in the distance.' " The first half of the image, "The night is shattered," suggests a dual intent on Neruda's part. On the one hand, this image could mean that Neruda himself "is shattered" because the awful realization that he and his lover have parted ways permanently has pierced him like a dart. On the other hand, the image could imply that the dark cloud, so to speak, that had hung over him like a black hole ever since the parting of ways has finally dissipated, and now he can see clearly enough to articulate the full depth of his anguish. It could mean, in fact, that he has reached a state of such intense clarity that he can actually see "blue stars shiver in the distance." Along with its striking beauty, this second half of the image communicates the deep chill he feels now in relation to the loss of his lover. That the stars are "blue" is significant, for the color blue connotes not only sadness (i.e., "since my baby left, I've been so blue") but extreme coldness, such as when lips turn blue in the winter wind. And as if these distant, blue stars aren't cold enough already, they're *shivering*. This verb not only adds to the sense of biting coldness (the kind that can numb the human heart when it is broken) but also personifies that deep chill in such a way that the reader can feel it and identify with it. Neruda here is inferring that his sadness is so immense that it is causing distant stars to freeze. One could say that he is grossly overstating the intensity of his emotional state, but try telling that to someone who has lost a lover.

This powerful image is immediately followed by another key figure of speech: "The night wind revolves in the sky and sings." Often in poetry, mention of the night wind signifies a dark, turbulent time in the speaker's soul, and sure enough, that the night wind is in motion in "Poem XX" connotes a certain turbulence. However, this night wind is not howling but singing, which definitely undercuts the usual associations that the night wind delivers in poetry. Here, perhaps, Neruda is implying that since the night has been "shattered," and, to quote a popular song in America, he "can see clearly now," the speaker (as represented by the night wind) can finally give lyrical voice to the tempestuous state of his soul, can sing that soul into rejuvenation. This interpretation is bolstered by the placement of the next line ("Tonight I can write the saddest lines"), which repeats the poem's opening statement and reinforces the idea that the poet is finally able to begin the process of healing his anguish. Like the night wind, the speaker has in a sense been going around in circles and getting nowhere, but now he is ready to sing of the loss of his lover in an attempt (perhaps a doomed one) to exorcise her memory so he can move on with his life. This notion is further reinforced later in the poem, when the speaker says in line 24: "My voice tried to find the wind to touch her

hearing." In other words, although he has finally broken through his pain enough to articulate that pain, the one whom he really wants to hear his lament, his lost lover, no longer wants to listen.

Yet another vivid image, line 21's "The same night whitening the same trees," is the most perplexing of all in "Poem XX." On the surface, this line strikes one as utterly irrational; after all, how can night, with its deep blackness, whiten anything? The only time when night can whiten trees is during an overnight snowfall, and while this suggestion seems in keeping with the earlier image of blue stars shivering in the distance, it doesn't really fit into the context of the poem, given that a night when one can see blue stars in the sky couldn't be the same night when snowfall is obscuring the stars from one's vision. The image is a tough one to crack, and after much pondering, some readers might still find it somewhat impenetrable. The only explanation that makes even the slightest sense is that the speaker can see so clearly now— after a time of great darkness, presumably—that pitch-black trees look as bright to him as do "the blue stars shiver[ing] in the distance." In other words, with absolute clarity, he can now see his way through the dark woods that had surrounded him in the wake of the rift between the loved one and himself. Yet even this explanation of the image seems inadequate, and chances are that Neruda himself had no rational understanding of its implications. Sometimes an image just *feels* right, and ultimately a poet must trust this intuitive feeling. Fortunately for us, Neruda learned to trust his intuitive side at a very young age (he would have been no older than twenty when he wrote "Poem XX"), and this was an early indication of his budding genius.

The poem's figures of speech (what few there are) resonate deeply in the reader's psyche, but ultimately what impresses one about the poem is the undaunted honesty and lyrical intensity of Neruda's voice as he struggles for closure in a situation where closure is difficult, if not impossible. Neruda's stirring combination of colloquial simplicity and use of repetition in key lines such as "Tonight I can write the saddest lines," "The night is shattered," and "I no longer love her, that's certain" helps create an impassioned sincerity and haunting mood not easily forgotten by the reader. While it is true, as noted by René de Costa in *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, that ""Poem XX" closes a series of unsuccessful attempts to communicate with the loved one," we, as readers, should be thankful that Neruda at least made the attempt. For although he may not have succeeded in reaching the ears of his former lover, he has very much succeeded in reaching ours. Given the lyrical honesty of Neruda's poetic voice, how could we *not* listen?

Source: Cliff Saunders, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #4

Pagnattaro has a J.D. and Ph.D. in English and is a freelance writer and a Terry Teaching Fellow in the Terry College of Business at the University of Georgia. In the following essay, Pagnattaro explores Neruda's early love poetry and the loss he expresses in "Tonight I Can Write."

Neruda is well known for his love poetry, yet a lesser known fact is that Neruda, as a young boy, was so painfully shy that he feigned indifference to girls. Fearing that he might somehow embarrass himself, Neruda lived his early years as what he called a kind of "deaf-mute." In his *Memoirs*, Neruda elaborates saying that

instead of going after girls, since I knew I would stutter or turn red in front of them, I preferred to pass them up and go on my way, showing a total lack of interest I was very far from feeling. They were all a deep mystery to me. I would have liked to burn at the stake in that secret fire, to drown in the depth of that inscrutable well, but I lacked the courage to throw myself into the fire or the water. And since I could find no one to give me a push, I walked along the fascinating edge, without even a side glance, much less a smile.

Neruda sought refuge in poetry, publishing his first book, *Crepusculario*, in 1923. Because of its traditional meter, fellow Chilean poet Marjorie Agosin observes that this book "follows the patterns set by Chilean romantic poetry of the last century, mixed with traces of modernism—that Spanish- American literary current that swept the continent from 1888 to 1916 and that was the first original literary movement originating in Spanish America." In this early collection, Neruda frequently used Alexandrine meter (lines consisting of six iambic feet), as he began to explore the fleeting quality of love and the loneliness that the absence of love can produce. Having invested a great deal emotionally and financially in the book, Neruda was elated when *Crepusculario* was first published.

The joy of publication, however, was soon undercut by Neruda's deep poetic anxiety about the direction of his verse. He apparently felt constrained by traditional forms, yet was apprehensive about breaking free of the kind of verse which was readily accepted. Neruda took short trips to the southern part of Chile attempting to renew his creative powers. In his *Memoirs* he describes "a strange experience":

I had returned home to Temuco. It was past midnight. Before going to bed, I opened the windows in my room. The sky dazzled me. The entire sky was alive, swarming with a lively multitude of stars. The night looked freshly washed and the Antarctic stars were spreading out in formation over my head. I became star-drunk, celestially, cosmically drunk. I rushed to my table and wrote, with heart beating high, as if I were taking dictation it was smooth going, as if I were swimming in my very own waters.

Neruda tells of how he then "locked the door on a rhetoric" that he "could never go on with, and deliberately toned down" his style and expression.

The result was *Veinte poemas de amor y una cancion desperada (Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair)*, published in 1924. This is one of his best-known and most translated works. In this collection, Neruda begins to develop his own voice, leaving behind the regular rhyme and measured verses. The result is astonishing. As Agosin notes, "Neruda's simplicity, sparse imagery, and above all, unabashed expression of amorous statements were innovations that immediately commanded the attention of the reading public." By Neruda's own description, this is "a painful book of pastoral poems filled with [his] most tormented adolescent passions, mingled with the devastating nature of the southern part of [his] country." Neruda elaborated in his *Memoirs*, saying that the collection captured his love affair with the city of Santiago, the "student-crowded streets," the University of Chile and the "honeysuckle fragrance of requited love."

Indeed, because of the amorous and erotic nature of the poems, Neruda was often asked what woman inspired his *Twenty Love Poems*. In his *Memoirs* he acknowledged that this is a difficult question to answer, then gave the following explanation:

The two women who weave in and out of these melancholy and passionate poems correspond, let's say, to Marisol and Marisombra: Sea and Sun, Sea and Shadow. Marisol is love in the enchanted countryside, with stars in bold relief at night, and dark eyes like the wet sky of Temuco. She appears with all her joyfulness and her lively beauty on almost every page, surrounded by the waters of the port and by a half-moon over the mountains. Marisombra is the student in the city. Gray beret, very gentle eyes, the ever-present honeysuckle fragrance of my footloose and fancy-free school days, the physical peace of the passionate meetings in the city's hideaways.

Despite this explanation, many of Neruda's readers are not satisfied. There is ongoing voyeuristic speculation about the specific identity of the women who might be the subject of these poems. Exposing the actual women, however, is not necessary to understand the universal sense of passion and loss which permeates the verse.

"Tonight I Can Write" is the twentieth love poem in *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. The preceding poems are often lavish and sensual often comparing the female body to a lush landscape and the vastness of the natural world. "Tonight I Can Write," however, marks what has often been described as a "shipwreck" in the couple's relationship. The entire poem is a deeply felt elegy for lost love. The first line of the poem begins by repeating the title and adding the characterization "the saddest lines." This suggests a meditative creative place in which the poet can channel his painful resignation into verse. The next threeline stanza sets forth examples of such lines: "'The night is shattered / and the blue stars shiver in the distance.' / The night wind revolves in the sky and sings." The romance is destroyed utterly and the speaker seems to be both isolated from and taunted by the natural world.

The remainder of the poem consists of fourteen two-line stanzas. In these lines, readers learn that their love was both requited and unrequited: "I loved her, and she sometimes loved me too" and "She loved me, sometimes I loved her too." Despite this ambivalence, the affair was passionate. He says "I kissed her again and again under the endless sky." He feels the immensity of loss, and admitting his "love could not keep

her." Unable to accept the loss, he says, "My sight searches for her as though to go to her. / My heart looks for her, and she is not with me." He is trying to come to terms with the end of their relationship. Attempting to convince himself that he is over his lover, he twice repeats the line "I no longer love her, that's certain." Each time, however, his assertion is undercut by his acknowledgment of the extent of his romantic entanglement. He first says "but how I loved her," then later backpedals pondering "but maybe I love her."

The speaker is tormented by the thought of his lover in the arms of another:

Another's. She will be another's. As she was before my kisses.

Her voice. Her bright body. Her infinite eyes.

The difficult process of moving on is underscored: "Love is so short, forgetting so long." This is a long, lonely night which reminds him of other nights when he held her in his arms, one in which his "soul is not satisfied that it has lost her."

In the final stanza, Neruda enjambs the two lines: "Though this be the last pain that she makes me suffer / and these the last verses that I write for her." The result is to connect unequivocally the pain the speaker feels with the creative impetus for the poem, suggesting that the production of the poem will somehow eradicate the pain. Yet, readers who have experienced the pain of lost love know better; there is a lingering sense of torment in these last lines.

Moreover, because "Tonight I Can Write" is followed by "The Song of Despair," there is a clear indication that the pain continues. Here the speaker is left with the surging memory of his lover in a deep lament expressed in terms of coastal, sea imagery. Great anguish is expressed for the woman he has lost. He implores "Oh flesh, my own flesh, woman whom I have loved and lost, / I summon you in the moist hour, I raise my song to you." He continues, "Deserted like the wharves at dawn. / Only the tremulous shadow twists in my hands." In the somewhat ambiguous concluding line, "It is the hour of departure. Oh abandoned one!" the poet seems to simultaneously grieve for himself and the woman. Their once passionate relationship is over.

Throughout his career, Neruda sought to write poetry which would be accessible. He believed that "A poet can write for a university or a labor union, for skilled workers and professionals." As he also stressed in his *Memoirs*, he saw poetry as a "deep inner calling in man Today's social poet is still a member of the earliest order of priests. In the old days he made his pact with the darkness, and now he must interpret the light." Neruda does, indeed, shed light on the darkest moments of the soul.

Source: Marisa Anne Pagnattaro, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

All of the poems in *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* were released on cassette by Viking Penguin in 1996.

Topics for Further Study

Take a walk in a natural setting: the woods, the beach, a park. Write a poem about what you see. Does your mood in any way affect your descriptions?

Research theories of remembering and forgetting. How does your research relate to the speaker in "Tonight I Can Write" ?

Compare and contrast the statements on despair in W. H. Auden's "Funeral Blues" and Neruda's "Song of Despair." How does the style in each reflect the theme?

Compare and Contrast

1924: The first airplanes to circle the globe arrive in California after flying 30,000 miles in five months.

1996: The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) announces that Mars may have supported life-forms. The report cites evidence gained from an analysis of a meteorite found in Antarctica in 1984.

1924: The United States Congress passes the Johnson-Reed Act, which removes restrictions on immigration from Canada and Latin America. As a result, by the end of the year, immigration numbers from these areas break previous records.

1996: Mexico and the United States sign several pacts including the Migrants' Rights pact, which grants rights to legal and illegal Mexicans in the United States.

1924: The United States Congress recognizes Native Americans as U.S. citizens.

1996: The South African government makes its final transition from apartheid to democracy with the adoption of a new constitution. President F. W. de Klerk resigns.

What Do I Read Next?

Emily Dickinson's "After great pain, a formal feeling comes" (*The Poems of Emily Dickinson,* 1929) focuses on the acceptance of grief.

"Funeral Blues" by W. H. Auden, published in 1940 in his *Another Time,* presents a portrait of the suffering experienced after the death of a loved one.

"The Song of Despair" is another poem by Neruda, published with "Tonight I Can Write" in *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair,* that expresses the speakers memories of a past relationship and pain over its dissolution.

Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" in 1923. In this poem, published in her *Collected Poems* that same year, the speaker laments the loss of past lovers and the resulting state of emptiness.

Further Study

Bencivenga, Jim, Review in *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 22, 1999, p. 21.

This reviewer finds Nerudas poems in *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* to be focused on a speaker who is like "Narcissus turning away from his image in the pool only to find it wherever he looks."

Review in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 240, No. 45, November 8, 1993, p. 59.

This reviewer states that in *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* "Neruda charts the oceanic movements of passion, repeatedly summoning imagery of the sea and weather."

Bibliography

Agosin, Marjorie, "Chapter 2: Love Poetry," in *Twaynes World Authors Series Online*, G. K. Hall Co., 1999.

_____, *Pablo Neruda*, translated by Lorraine Roses, Twayne Publishers, 1986.

Clemens, Robert, Review in *Saturday Review*, July 9, 1966.

de Costa, René, "Pablo Neruda: Overview," in *Reference Guide to World Literature*, 2d ed., edited by Lesley Henderson, St. James Press, 1995.

Duran, Manuel, and Margery Safir, *Earth Tones: The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, Indiana University Press, 1981.

Neruda, Pablo, *Memoirs*, translated by Hardie St. Martin, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976.

"Pablo Neruda," in *Twentieth Century Authors*, First Supplement, edited by Stanley J. Kunitz, H. W. Wilson Company, 1967, p. 709.

Schade, George D., "Pablo Neruda," in *Latin American Writers*, Vol. 3, Scribners, 1989.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Poetry for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535