To a Sad Daughter Study Guide

To a Sad Daughter by Michael Ondaatje

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Introduction

"To a Sad Daughter" appears in Michael Ondaatje's 11th collection of poetry, *Secular Love,* published in 1984. In "Coming Through: A Review of *Secular Love,"* critic Sam Solecki comments that the poems in this book read "more like the chapters of a novel than parts of a collection." "To a Sad Daughter," however, can easily be pulled from the rest and enjoyed alone, for it encompasses a theme common in many of our lives and presents it in a striking, not-so-common way: a father's love for his daughter and his longing to guide her "into the wild world" (line 64) gently, but with eyes wide open.

While there have been countless father-daughter poems written over the decades, not many include hockey goalies, purple moods, and *Creatures From the Black Lagoon.* Ondaatje's poetry is rich in all forms of human experience, and his use of everyday language and everyday events to define that experience makes his work both compelling and accessible. "To a Sad Daughter" is written while the speaker sits at his daughter's bedroom desk when she is not present. At one point, he refers to the poem as his "first lecture" to the 16-year-old, but it is a lecture full of love and wonderment and admitted anxiety, not anger and rebuke.

While the title identifies the daughter as melancholy or grieving, she is not actually present in the work, and so we must consider the word "sad" as only an interpretation of the father's. After reading the poem, we may also consider that the doleful adjective is really a reflection of the speaker's own emotion and that he too experiences the apprehension, blue funk, and growing pains that his adolescent daughter does.

Author Biography

Michael Ondaatje was born in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), in 1943. Located off the southern tip of India and sometimes called India's "teardrop" because of its shape, this small island has been home to much conflict between various religious, ethnic, and political factions. Ondaatje's family was a member of Ceylon's wealthy colonial society who distanced themselves as much as possible from the civil strife but often created their own combat in the form of drunkenness and raucous parties. His mother performed part-time as a radical dancer, and his father was an alcoholic tea and rubber plantation superintendent. Eventually, his mother had enough of the father's drinking and outrageous behavior—he reportedly liked to board trains and run the aisles waving a gun and spouting "revolutionary" slogans—and the couple divorced. When Michael was 11, he moved to London with his mother, and, at 19, he moved to Canada, began his college career, and has lived and worked there ever since.

Ondaatje's writing career also began when he moved to Canada, and he has produced an abundant amount of work in various genres since then: to date, 13 poetry collections, four novels, numerous screen plays, and dozens of critical articles for literary journals. While his literature and criticism have long been respected and admired by scholars, teachers, fellow writers, and avid readers in general, Ondaatje did not make his debut into worldwide "popular" culture until 1997, when the major motion picture film adaptation of his 1992 novel *The English Patient* won an Academy Award for Best Picture.

Ondaatje's work has never shied away from being factual in the sense that he writes about real people and real occurrences in his life. Critics over the years have treated his "family" poems as autobiography with a creative bent, and "To a Sad Daughter" is presumably one of them. His novel/autobiography, *Running in the Family* (1982), is a sometimes funny, sometimes shocking discourse on his life and family in Ceylon, and we must consider how much the turmoil of his early years affected his responses to the growth of his own children. While all fathers with sixteen-year-old daughters may suffer the distress that goes along with the role, Ondaatje seems to include a particular urgency in his message and his advice to his daughter. Perhaps his strained relations with and eventual separation from his own father added a dimension of fervor and immediacy in expressing feelings for his child, or perhaps it was simply that she was growing up in a world much different from the one he knew as a young boy, and his desire both to protect her and to set her free was at times overwhelming.

Michael Ondaatje received his bachelor's degree in 1965 from the University ofToronto and his master's in 1967 from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. Although he never pursued a doctorate, he has taught in the English Department ofGlendon College,York University in Toronto since 1971.

Poem Text

All night long the hockey pictures
gaze down at you sleeping in your tracksuit.
Belligerent goalies are your ideal.
Threats of being traded
cuts and wounds
□all this pleases you.
O My god! you say at breakfast
reading the sports page over the Alpen
as another player breaks his ankle
or assaults the coach.
When I thought of daughters
I wasn't expecting this
but I like this more.
I like all your faults
even your purple moods
when you retreat from everyone
to sit in bed under a quilt.
And when I say 'like'
I mean of course 'love'
but that embarrasses you.
You who feel superior to black and white movies
(coaxed for hours to see *Casablanca*
though you were moved

by *Creature from the Black Lagoon.*

One day I'll come swimming
beside your ship or someone will
and if you hear the siren
listen to it. For if you close your ears
only nothing happens, you will never change.
I don't care if you risk
your life to angry goalies
creatures with webbed feet
You can enter their caves and castles
their glass laboratories. Just
don't be fooled by anyone but yourself.
This is the first lecture I've given you.
You're 'sweet sixteen' you said.
I'd rather be your closest friend
than your father. I'm not good at advice
you know that, but ride
the ceremonies
until they grow dark.
Sometimes you are so busy
discovering your friends
I ache with a loss
□but that is greed
And sometimes I've gone
into *my* purple world

and lost you.
One afternoon I stepped
into your room. You were sitting
at the desk where I now write this.
Forsythia outside the window
and sun spilled over you
like a thick yellow miracle
as if another planet
was coaxing you out of the house
□all those possible worlds!□
and you, meanwhile, busy with mathematics.
I cannot look at forsythia now
without loss, or joy for you.
You step delicately
into the wild world
and your real prize will be
the frantic search.
Want everything. If you break
break going out not in.
How you live your life I don't care
but I'll sell my arms for you,
hold your secrets forever.
If I speak of death
which you fear now, greatly,
it is without answers.

except that each

one we know is

in our blood.

don't recall graves.

Memory is permanent

Remember the afternoon's

yellow suburban annunciation.

Your goalie

in his frightening mask

dreams perhaps

of gentleness.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-11:

The first stanza of "To a Sad Daughter" provides a snapshot of the girl who is the subject of this poem. If we did not know the title, our first assumption may be that the speaker is describing his *son* who is a typical sports enthusiast. Knowing the name of the piece, however, we are intrigued by the description of the bedroom that belongs to a girl and by her behavior at the breakfast table. She has not only selected sports figures as her idols, but she has chosen players from a very violent, rough, and highly male-dominated sport: "Belligerent goalies are your ideal." She has posted pictures, probably from sports magazines, of hockey players on the walls of her bedroom where most young girls may hang photos of popular singers or handsome movie stars. She does not sleep in a pretty gown or in typical girls' pajamas, but in a track-suit. Perhaps most revealing in the description of the daughter is that "Threats ... / cuts and wounds" *please* her. These are words not commonly thought to describe pleasant circumstances for anyone, especially a young female, but, nonetheless, the subject here is attracted to the bloodshed, bruises, and ruthlessness of the sport of hockey. The only hint of "girlishness" that appears in this first stanza is in line 8 where we see her italicized reaction to a sports page article: "0 *my god!"* she exclaims, and it is easy to imagine the scene as a father watches his wide-eyed daughter hold a newspaper over her bowl of cereal ("Alpen") and spout out her alarmist remark about a broken ankle or fight between player and coach. Obviously, in the sport of hockey, neither of these incidents is even unusual, much less alarming, but Ondaatje is careful to let us know there is still a bit of innocence and "silliness" beneath the otherwise tough exterior of his little girl.

Lines 12-25:

The second stanza discloses more of the daughter's vulnerable, softer side and also provides insight into the father's personal assessment of his female child: "When I thought of daughters/ I wasn't expecting this/ but I like this more." He also confesses that he likes her "purple moods" when she demonstrates a typical teenager's aloofness and reclusiveness, probably stalking off to her room "to sit in bed under a quilt" with a *nobody understands me* attitude. Ondaatje admits that he uses the word "like" only in deference to his daughter's embarrassment over hearing a parent talk about love, although *love* is precisely what he feels for her. We also see the girl's youthful disposition in her scoffing at things old-fashioned, as she feels "superior to black and white movies." In the last three lines of the stanza, the poet returns to the image of a daughter with prevalent tomboy features, telling us that she had to be "coaxed for hours to see *Casablanca,"* a romantic love story that many women, as well as men, have watched over and over, but that she was "moved / by *Creatures from the Black Lagoon,*" an old horror movie featuring a web-footed lizard-like creature who rises from murky waters and terrorizes everyone in its path-not typically a "girl's" movie.

Lines 26-36:

The third stanza gives us a first look at the father's main concerns involving his daughter's future. Some parents may find his advice unthinkable and even dangerous, but Ondaatje delivers such a compelling rationale that we cannot help but understand he has the girl's best interest in mind. In the first five lines, the poet uses striking mythological imagery to make his "cautionary" point, although we may see it as "reverse" caution, since he urges her to do exactly the opposite of what many fathers would advise. In mythological tales, sirens were sea nymphs whose sweet singing lured unsuspecting sailors to their island. The catch was that the island was surrounded by craggy rocks, and the mariners met their fate when their ships were destroyed by the hidden danger. Eventually, some sailors learned to cover their ears and pass the seductive singing without falling victim to it, but many failed. In this poem, the father tells his daughter, "One day I'll come swimming/beside your ship or someone will / and if you hear the siren / listen to it." This may sound like astonishing advice□a father telling his daughter to follow a path to sure destruction, but he offers his reasons in the next lines: "For if you close your ears / only nothing happens. You will never change." Here, the poet indicates that "change" is vital to growth and to living a fulfilling life. He would rather his daughter take risks and discover what the world has to offer than to hide away in a protective shell where "nothing happens" but the same experiences, the same thoughts, the same beliefs. He refers back to hockey and to the old horror movie in saying, "I don't care if you risk / your life to angry goalies / creatures with webbed feet." He then goes on to reiterate his point that he'd rather his daughter go out into the world and learn from her own mistakes than be led by the opinions and actions of others: "You can enter their caves and castles/ their glass laboratories. Just / don't be fooled by anyone but yourself."

Lines 37-50:

In the fourth and fifth stanzas the father declares that his poem is "the first lecture" he has given his daughter who is "'sweet sixteen,'" and he also reveals a confession about his relationship with her: "I'd rather be your closest friend / than your father." Lines 44-46 tell us why: "Sometimes you are so busy / discovering your friends /I ache with a loss." Most parents go through a time of "losing" their children to friends who seemingly become more important to the young people, and with whom they prefer to share their most private thoughts. The father also confesses he is "not good at advice," but he asks his daughter to bear with him while he performs his paternal duties ("... but ride/ the ceremonies"), and he asks for her patience only until those duties fade with age and no longer shed light on her future: "until they grow dark." As a final confession, the father states that he too has bad moods and retreats into his own "purple world" where feeling the loss of his daughter is his own fault.

Lines 51-60:

The sixth stanza captures beautifully a single moment in time—one that is now only a memory for the father and that the daughter does not even know occurred. The father remembers stepping into the girl's room, probably just in the doorway long enough to see her busy doing homework while sunlight and shrubs with bright yellow blooms cast a "thick yellow miracle" over her. Although his daughter is oblivious to the significance of the moment ("and you, meanwhile, busy with mathematics"), the father imagines the golden glow surrounding her as "another planet / ... coaxing you out of the house." Referring back to his notion that there is so much of life and so many opportunities out there for his daughter, he exclaims "all those possible worlds!" and we sense both excitement and resignation in his remark.

Lines 61-71:

The seventh stanza is a reaffirmation of Ondaatje's advice to his daughter which he so fervently conveyed in the third stanza. He begins by conceding that he cannot think of the other worldly yellow light he envisioned luring the girl away from him without feeling both pain and joy. He has already claimed to want her to explore all the options the future holds for her, but he also must face the sadness it will bring him when she leaves home for good. Because she is still innocent and naive in many ways and unaware of all the world's dangers, he sees her "... step delicately / into the wild world." Lines 65-66 present an intriguing comment on what the father hopes his daughter discovers *out there,* and it is not any one thing in particular. Rather, it is the search itself that will be most fulfilling for her to experience, that will be "the real prize." She should "want everything," not just one thing or another, for that would leave her short of discovering the countless opportunities (as well as misfortunes) that real living has to offer. He then reiterates his provocative advice: "If you break/ break going out not in." By this, he means that it is better to try something and fail than not to try it at all. If his daughter is going to "break," he would rather it be after she has already attempted an opportunity instead of before she has ever tried to get "in." Lines 69-70 present an interesting juxtaposition of emotions, first depicting a seeming nonchalance, and then describing love so strong that it is the ultimate in selflessness. The father claims, "How you live your life I don't care," and then quickly announces his willingness to sacrifice for her no matter what path she chooses: "but I'll sell my arms for you / hold your secrets forever."

Lines 72-85:

In the final stanza, the poet makes first mention of death, and he offers his advice regarding it in a much more somber and gentler manner than that regarding life. He acknowledges that the young girl fears death and admits that he cannot really explain or understand it himself—he is "without answers," except for one. What he does know is that each time someone we know dies, we die a little bit ourselves, for "each / one we know is / in our blood." Accepting that, the father cautions his daughter not to dwell on the deaths of loved ones, not to "recall graves" because if she does, that is all she will

remember about them: "Memory is permanent." Instead, he encourages her to "Remember the afternoons / yellow suburban annunciation." In other words, he wants her to share his anticipation and wonderment at all the possible worlds calling her, the worlds he imagined when he came upon her in her room with the sunlight pouring over her in the backdrop of yellow flowers outside the window. The father obviously clings to this memory because it is one of both peaceful-ness and possibility, both tranquility and hope. He ends the poem on his own note of hopefulness, telling his daughter that even her tough, frightening goalie "dreams perhaps / of gentleness." By saying this, he puts all his other, less "typical," advice in perspective. He wants his daughter not to be afraid to explore and take chances and not to back down from the challenges or hardships of a full life; but he also wants her to understand that beneath even the roughest, coldest exteriors, we may find a longing to be tender and kind.

Themes

Reality and Ambiguity

Michael Ondaatje is widely accepted as a writer of reality, but how he defines reality is a recurring theme within his work. Most often, the world he describes is chaotic, and the typical human response to it is panic. But at the center of the chaos, and, therefore, the center of the panic, lies a good reason for both: ambiguity. Very little is clear-cut in this poet's world. Even his daughter turned out to be not what he was "expecting," but rather something he likes even more. Her own life is full of turmoil and uncertainty, easily attributed to the fact that she's a teenager, but, even so, she is not the "usual" adolescent girl. We can simply list the images that portray her qualities, her emotions, her likes and dislikes to note a type of self-inflicted chaos: belligerent goalies, threats, cuts and wounds, purple moods, horror movie creatures, and the caves and castles in which they live. On the other hand, we also see her in a "retreat" mode, sitting quietly "in bed under a quilt," and we catch her in an innocent moment when she is engrossed in schoolwork within a sun-filled room, a positive and peaceful scene. Ondaatje's poetry reflects a cryptic reality, both puzzling and exhilarating, and it sometimes results in a variety of descriptions of one entity in a single poem. In "To a Sad Daughter," he uses three different adjectives to describe the world: "purple" (line 49), "possible" (line 59), and "wild" (line 64). Note how each of these descriptors carries a different connotation, with "purple" implying a gloomy or melancholy world, "possible" offering hope, opportunity, and excitement, and "wild" indicating an untamed or dangerous world. While seeming to be contradictory, each description is true, or real, in its own right; therefore, the only *one* word that can accurately define the world, or reality, in general, is "ambiguous."

Taking Risks

One of the most daring aspects of Ondaatje's "To a Sad Daughter" is his encouraging the girl to take risks in her life□to listen to the "siren," "want everything," and to "break going out not in." The father tells his daughter to live frantically in order to live fully, for taking chances is much better than leading a reserved, protected life in which "nothing happens." Perhaps this advice is only a reflection of how the father lives his own life or how he *wishes* he lived it, and he wants the same, or more, for his child. Imagery is a key in depicting the fervor of the father's intentions, and in several of Ondaatje's poems, water imagery is that key. Water is both frightening and calming, and in this piece we have the two working together. "One day I'll come swimming/ beside your ship ..." depicts a peaceful scene, or at least one in which there is no hint of pending trouble. In the next line, however, the poet alludes to shipwrecks and death, the result of deception, and, despite the new imagery, he presents the deadly waters as inviting and worth tempting. Here again there is a note of panic in the desire to experience real life, a desire that overrides what many may view as common sense. The father in this poem would have us believe that common sense leads only to boredom and a wasted life.

Unselfish Love

Even those who read "To a Sad Daughter" and feel uneasy, or even angry, with the advice the father gives the girl cannot deny the evidence proclaiming the poet's intense love for her. He loves even her faults, though he uses the word "like" to keep from embarrassing her; he would rather be her friend than her father during this stage of life because her friends are closer to her; he feels both loss and joy when he thinks of "all those possible worlds" awaiting her; and he would "sell" his arms for her, make any sacrifice to show his love. Ironically, it is this unselfish love that underpins the father's desperate attempt to thrust his daughter headlong into the real world. He wants her to have the most complete life possible, even if it means risking it "to angry goalies / creatures with webbed feet." And although he experiences the natural pangs of all parents whose children grow up and venture out on their own, he does not even consider standing in her way or offering advice that may thwart her curiosity and daring spirit. He asks only that she does not limit herself and declares his support no matter what.

Style

"To a Sad Daughter" is an 85-line poem with eight stanzas written in free verse. While Ondaatje does not rely on any overt poetic devices here, a close look does reveal considerable use of alliteration, as well as a strategy fairly common and always remarkable in this poet's work□his ability to sharply define a message with brief, surprising statements.

Many of the lines in "To a Sad Daughter" are quite prosy, detracting from the assonance and consonance that would otherwise be more prevalent. We find, however, a good flow of sound in such instances as the repetition of the "p" in "... reading the sports page over the Alpen/ as another player ..."; the repetition of the "ah" sound in "When I thought of daughters /I wasn't ..."; the various uses of "s" in "... I'll come swimming / beside your ship or someone will / and if you hear the siren / listen ..."; the "s" sound again in "You were sitting / at the desk where I now write this / Forsythia outside the window / and sun spilled over you ..."; and even the near-rhyme at the end of the poem with the use of "mask" and "perhaps." What keeps the alliteration in this poem from seeming forced and unnatural is that it is cloaked within casual verbiage, giving the words more of a prose cadence than a poetic one. In a 1984 interview with Ondaatje, Sam Solecki asked the poet about his recently published *Secular Love,* and Ondaatje had this to say about its form: "I wanted to call my new book of poems ... 'a novel.' I structured it like one. For me, its structure and plot are novelistic." Even so, "To a Sad Daughter" contains just enough of the elements of poetry to prevent it from sounding like a paragraph broken into short lines.

While these short lines, however, do string together into complete sentences throughout the poem, Ondaatje includes an element of surprise by shifting suddenly to abrupt short phrases that startle us both with their message and their exactness. For example, the first two "sentences" of the third stanza, read as such, are followed by a four-word statement that suddenly rings of doom: One day, I'll come swimming beside your ship, or someone will, and if you hear the siren, listen to it. For if you close your ears, only nothing happens. *You will never change.* In the seventh stanza, an even more poignant message appears in only two words, preceded by a longer sentence: You step delicately into the wild world and the real prize will be the frantic search. *Want everything.* Critic George Bowering, in his article "Ondaatje Learning to Do," claims that "the poet shows us a sure comprehension of what a line is, not just a length, not only a syntactic unit, but a necessary step in knowing and surprise." In the final stanza, the poet employs his "knowing and surprise" once again in advising his daughter about death: If I speak of death, which you fear now, greatly, it is without answers, except that each one we know is in our blood. *Don't recall graves.* This mixture of lengthy and brief lines in the poem is an appealing addition to an already intriguing work.

Historical Context

Time and place are not essential in Michael Ondaatje's "To a Sad Daughter." The message, or the advice, passed down from father to daughter is the central issue, and it could occur anywhere at any time. It is unlikely, however, that a man would offer such liberal advice to his little girl in years prior to the second half of the twentieth century, and so we may assume the time frame is "contemporary." The only confirmation of that in the poem is the reference to items and events that were not prevalent or not available earlier, tracksuits and the National Hockey League, for instance. We also know that the poem takes place when color motion pictures have been common for many years since the 16-year-old feels "superior" to black and white movies. As for place, we may assume that the father and daughter live somewhere in the "north" since hockey is the sport of choice, although we now have professional ice hockey teams located in cities in the southern United States. Another clue is the mention of the cereal "Alpen," a popular breakfast food in northern Europe and Canada, though not a household name in America. Our best sense of setting for this poem stems simply from knowing that Ondaatje writes mainly from real-life experiences and that his "family" poems are primarily creative nonfiction. Given that, "To a Sad Daughter" probably takes place in Ontario, Canada, sometime during the early 1980s.

The decade of the 1980s is sometimes looked back on as culturally benign. The disco craze and flashy fashions of the 1970s gave way to a more bland mixture of "new-wave" music and power-chord rock as well as the "grunge" look of loose-fitting jeans, sweatshirts, and flannel shirts. But more was going on than some of the decade's admittedly "me-first" generation recognized. Perhaps an anonymous author who has posted a Web page entitled "Children of the Eighties" captures best both the spirit and the lack of spirit that made up this often-thought mundane, self-indulgent period of time: "We are the children of the Eighties.... We collected Garbage Pail Kids and Cabbage Patch Kids ... and He-Man action figures and [I] thought She-Ra looked just a little bit like I would when I was a woman.... In the Eighties, nothing was wrong. Did you know the president was shot? ... Did you see the Challenger explode or feed the homeless man? We forgot Vietnam and watched Tiananman's Square on CNN and bought pieces of the Berlin Wall at the store."

This was the world in which Michael Ondaatje was raising his daughter. Wars still raged across the world, there was plenty of violence happening in the streets at home, crack cocaine was invented, assassination attempts were not uncommon on the nightly news, and the general public reaction to it all was less than remarkable. While the murders of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s outraged people and sent them pouring into the streets in protest and in grief, the attempts to kill President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II, both in 1981, elicited only cursory, often cynical, responses from millions of people around the world. Also in the early 80s, AIDS began to be recognized as an epidemic, but most people brushed the deadly disease off as a plague on homosexuals and something that could not touch their own "straight" lives. The father in "To a Sad Daughter" surely knows that his child will face more than "angry goalies" and "creatures with webbed feet" when she grows up and leaves home, and he

wants her to be prepared to face everything□including war, drugs, and disease□with her eyes wide open. In light of the "wild" and dangerous society she will become a part of, he wants her not only to accept the challenges of it, but also to look deep inside it, to search out whatever good she may find hidden beneath the chaos. He wants her to understand that even a "goalie / in his frightening mask / dreams perhaps / of gentleness."

Also evident in the historical context of this poem is that it presents a subject□a girl who can, and does, take her freedom and her self-confidence for granted. She does not appear to have any concerns over or struggles with "liberation" because she does not know what it's like *not* to be liberated. She has no qualms about pursuing interests typically sought by boys and men, and if she prefers reading the sports page over the society section and would rather watch horror films instead of love stories, so be it. She is growing up in a decade when many young girls do not give second thought to crossing the gender barrier, and she is being brought up in a home where her aspirations are apparently respected. The father does not attempt to turn his daughter into a "little lady," but rather eggs on her free spirit by encouraging her to "want everything." In the 1980s, many people did indeed want everything, and some, as it turned out, got more than they bargained for.

Critical Overview

Secular Love has not been the subject of an abundance of critique over the years, but, in general, Ondaatje's poetry has been highly acclaimed. One of the poet's most faithful reviewers has been critic Sam Solecki who, in his article "Nets and Chaos: the Poetry of Michael Ondaatje," says that in Ondaatje's work "the fundamental or essential nature of experience is consistently being described and examined. The entire thrust of his vision is directed at compelling the reader to reperceive reality...." We can see this theory at work in "To a Sad Daughter" in the way the speaker keeps describing and examining his own responses to his daughter's actions. He feels joy, he feels loss, and he seems to feel nearly everything in between. Although he is sometimes compared to Robert Lowell, John Berryman, or even Anne Sexton because of his tendency to write from real-life experiences, Ondaatje cannot really be called a "confessional" poet. As Solecki points out, "... he's rarely interested in enacting or describing his darkest and most problematic emotions and situations: the voice is too laconic, the tone too detached, and the attitude to the serf is ironic, even self-mocking."

Since Ondaatje has been such a prolific writer in various fields, he has encountered a wide-circuit of critics. By far, most have dealt with his novels, in particular *The English Patient.* In her book, *Michael Ondaatje: Word, Image, Imagination,* Leslie Mundwiler sums up the critics of his poetry with, "All of [them], it seems, have wanted to account for the imaginative force of his work, if only in passing.... Still, because the imagery is what makes so much of the poetry work, ... reviewers and critics must at least suggest the extraordinary moments that are there in the reading even while trying out the standard 'litcrit' labels." Regardless of the genre, however, Ondaatje's work is respected and admired, especially for its candor, its unusual imagery, and its ability to make us confront realities we may otherwise shun.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Bruce Meyer is the director of the creative writing program at the University ofToronto. He has taught at several Canadian universities and is the author of three collections of poetry. In the following essay, Meyer interprets Ondaatje's poem as a story of two lives and two universes separated by protective masks, and he evaluates how the distance between these two universes is bridged through Ondaatje's use of color imagery.

Michael Ondaatje's "To a Sad Daughter" is a poem about the way that surfaces mask much deeper emotions. The recurring theme of the hockey goalie, those caged athletes who don the personas of highly decorated masks not only to protect themselves but to make a statement about their own identities to the shooters from the opposing teams, act almost as mouthpieces□personas in the sense of classical drama□through which a father can speak lovingly to a teenaged daughter. In the process of attempting to bridge two very disparate worlds, Ondaatje manages to show how close, yet how far apart they really are. The distance that exists between the father and his daughter is the paradoxical distance of closeness that emerges in the most intense relationships. These are not merely two ships that pass in the night, to quote the rock star Ian Hunter, but two lives that live in parallel, almost similar universes.

The similarity between the two universes, the one of the father and the one of the daughter, can be fixed in Ondaatje's use of color imagery. Purple and yellow, the traditional colors of rebirth, Easter and the self-sacrifice associated with springtime mythopoeia, are used as markers by the poet to pinpoint the proximity of two separate beings within the same environment. The father notes, "I like all your faults / Even your purple moods / when you retreat from everyone," an idea that links the color purple to the hormone driven mood swings of the teenaged daughter. The similarities between the two, an association of the familial cliché 'like father, like daughter,' is echoed in the father's own statement, "And sometimes I've gone / into *my* purple world / and lost you." What seems to come between them is not merely the generation gap, but their own inner universes and complex range of passions that dwell there. What Ondaatje seems to be suggesting is that true intimacy is based on an acknowledgment of distances where the individuals co-exist not only in their shared world but in parallel universes of private lives that neither can fully comprehend or hope to penetrate. In the end, the most private experience of all, that of one' s own death, is something that presents the ultimate distance between them□a vacuum that is filled by the in-rush of fear: "If I speak of death / which you fear now, greatly, / it is without answers, / except that each / one we know is / in our blood." The distance between the two individuals, perhaps, is not as great as one would think in that they share the same fates, the same destinies as well as the same DNA patterns. In this light, the color purple takes on the appearance of a mourning cloak, a sense of inescapable finality where the father cannot hope to protect the daughter from the destiny that her physiology has imposed on her from the moment of her conception. Such a recognition makes the father's pleas that "I'll sell my arms for you" even more touching, though just as fruitless.

The color yellow, however, offers a balancing perspective to the issues of mortality and isolation that are suggested by the color purple. The blooming yellow forsythia outside the daughter's window as the father writes the poem at her desk is a signal of rebirth, of the continuance of life and of the way in which the cycles of existence repeat and replicate themselves. The final stanza of the poem asks the daughter to "Remember the afternoon's / yellow suburban annunciation," the color that he comes to associate not with their private, inner lives but with the moment at which he passes fatherly advice to his daughter. "This is the first lecture I've given you," he notes and the moment of their contact is illuminated and commemorated by the brightness of all the associations that the color yellow carries with it. It suggests an illuminating gesture where one individual reaches out to another to bridge a noticeable gap, and he underscores this dash of brightness with a statement that leaves some hope that the gap itself can be bridged: "I'd rather be your closest friend / than your father." What Ondaatje seems to be suggesting is that familial relations impose boundaries and strictures on individuals that, for the sake of issues such as authority and even parental love, are hard to breach or bridge with moments of understanding.

The difficulty of the bridging process, aside from the color symbolism that Ondaatje has constructed, is that it leads to the need to warn or at least advise. The father wishes to share his knowledge of the world with his daughter, but without appearing preachy or pompous. He is sensitive to her need to discover her own individuality on her own terms□even through the interest in hockey which he has difficulty understanding□but his urgency to give advice, at moments, overcomes his need to exercise reserve out of a sense of respect for her own individuality. "Just / don't be fooled by anyone but yourself," he proffers as he realizes "You step delicately / into the wild world / and your real prize will be / the frantic search." Life itself, he says, is the prize. The experiences that she will have will far outstrip any advice he can give, and he realizes that his own wisdom is a very limited matter: "I'm not good at advice / you know that, but ride / the ceremonies / until they grow dark." Living, he seems to understand, is a whole series of "yellow miracles" where the discovery of life, either in bushes outside a window or in moments of shared experience, far outweigh the inner, purple gloom of private moments of despair.

For Ondaatje, the process of communication is a means of understanding what goes on behind the masks, whether those masks are the gauzes on the face of a dying Hungarian spy in his novel *The English Patient,* the mask of bravado worn by William Bonney in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* or the protect gear donned by the daughter's heroes in "To a Sad Daughter." By laying bare the truths that one must speak, even if those truths are hard to comprehend or can only be reached through a labyrinth of metaphors, the process of communication is the avenue by which even the fiercest specters in the world become "gentle." The poem ends with the lines "Your goalie / in his frightening mask / dreams perhaps / of gentleness." For Ondaatje, the root of all human experience lies in that sense of gentleness that is there for all if only one takes the time and effort to find the articulate means of reaching it.

Source: Bruce Meyer, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Alice Van Wart teaches literature and writing in the Department of Continuing Education at the University ofToronto. She has published two books of poetry and has written articles on modern and contemporary literature. In the following essay, Van Wart describes how Ondaatje employs an atypical, plain style in order to amplify his subject.

One of Canada's most popular and one of its best writers, Michael Ondaatje, came to Canada by way of Ceylon and England before immigrating to Canada in 1962. Perhaps his early experiences in such diverse cultures account for the predominating trends in his work of a wide and general range of themes. As a successful writer of both poetry and prose, Ondaatje was the first Canadian writer to win the prestigious Booker Prize for his novel *The English Patient* (1992), which was subsequently made into a film of the same name and nominated for an Oscar.

The primary strength in his writing is the adaptation of technique to theme; in each new work he employs a technique that accurately corresponds to its theme. In his extended poem *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid,* for instance, he employs both poetry and prose to suggest the two sides of the legendary Billy the Kid. In *Coming Through Slaughter* he uses a variety of techniques and blends poetry with prose to create a form that suggests the improvisational nature of the music associated with his protagonist the legendary jazz musician Buddy Bolden. In each of his different works structure and characterization suit his subject.

Critics of Ondaatje's work point to his love of film as having a strong influence on his writing, particularly the techniques used in film to create its sense of immediacy. Ondaatje uses documents, photographs, first person accounts, interviews, historical records, and blurs the boundaries between poetry and prose and fact and fiction in his work in an attempt to record the immediacy of experience, or the processes of recollecting experience. In this respect he forces the reader to reperceive reality, to assume an unusual angle of vision from which reality appears to be absurd, inchoate, dynamic, ambiguous, even surreal. Even the ordinary and the domestic take on overtones of the exotic and the extravagant as he retrieves and reshapes information from history, personal account, myth, and legend to suit his needs.

Pointing out these general features of Ondaatje's work shows just how atypical is his poem "To a Sad Daughter." Gone is the exotic image, the lyrical language, and the experimental structure. Instead we have one of a handful of his poems written in a casual, plain style. This style, however, is intentional, working once again to correspond to and amplify his subject. "To a Sad Daughter" is written in the form of a letter to his daughter. The very simplicity of its language and its form is appropriate to the poem's intentions. In this poem/ letter Ondaatje creates the same familiar sense of immediacy found in his other work as he struggles to put into words what he wishes to say to a daughter who is growing away from him. The emotional power of the poem rests in the emotional context of the poem as the poet attempts to bridge a gulf between them by offering some fatherly advice and asking for her friendship. As he composes his

poem/letter to her the poet conveys both the subtleties of their relationship and his feelings.

The poem moves progressively through eight verses and contains what can be thought of as three parts composed of appeal, apology, and advice. The poem's title informs us that this poem/letter was written during one of his daughter's withdrawals, what he calls her "purple moods." He begins his letter by using gentle humor. His tone is slightly ironic as he pictures her sleeping in her "track suit" under the gaze of "hockey players." He acknowledges "Belligerent goalies are your ideal / threats of being traded / cuts and wounds." He seems baffled by her "ideal" found in the masculine world of violence, threats, aggression, and injury. He is amused at his daughter's response of "O my god" as she reads "the sports page over the Alpen."

In the second stanza the irony is confirmed when the poet admits to her, "When I thought of daughters /I wasn't expecting this." The discrepancy between what he imagined and what she is like suggests he was comparing her to another ideal, that of the stereotype of a girl more concerned with fashion than sports. Having acknowledged his mistake he quickly assures, "but I like this more. / I like all your faults/ even your purple moods / when you retreat from everyone / to sit in bed under a quilt." The lines suggest that the poet has said something, which may have unwittingly hurt his daughter's feelings, perhaps even the reason for her withdrawal. Possibly he made a remark about her tomboyish nature. Whatever has transpired there is a rift between them, which has motivated him to write this letter/poem to her. It is clear the poet is stepping cautiously, appeasing and reassuring her. He back steps and qualifies his use of his word "like," by telling her matter of factly, "And when I say 'like' /I mean of course 'love' / but that embarrasses you." Though she may be old enough to be embarrassed by the word love, the poet points out to her that she is not too old to be moved by certain sentimental films like Creature from the Black Lagoon. There is an edge of annoyance in the poet's voice when he recalls her outright dismissal of black and white movies ("You who feel superior to black and white movies," even Casablanca, though he had coaxed her to see it.

In the third stanza the poet shifts his tact and appeals to her from a different point of view arriving indirectly to the point he wants to make: "One day I'll come swimming / beside your ship or someone will / and if you hear the siren / listen to it." The shift to poetic language and the clumsy metaphor (in the hands of a poet who skillfully works with metaphor) ironically points to an unwillingness on his part to get to the point. His intention is to explain his reason for pushing her to watch a film in which she has no interest: "If you hear the siren / listen to it." The "siren" is an allusion to the mythical creatures, who sang such beautiful songs sailors lost their lives by being shipwrecked when they tried to find their source. The poet is suggesting she open herself to new experiences, rather than turn away from them. Even though there may be danger in hearing the sirens, if she "closes" her ears "only nothing happens" and she "will never change."

In the next line the poet's tone shifts again as he returns to prosaic language, using images from her world of reference to make his point clear: "I don't care if you risk / your

life to angry goalies," or "creatures with webbed feet. / You can enter their caves and castles / their glass laboratories." The poet's ambiguous words in the last line of the stanza: "Just don't be fooled by anyone but yourself," imply it is better to make your own mistakes by trying new experiences.

In the fourth stanza the poet shifts his direction again. He offers an apology realizing what he has said may sound too didactic and alienate her further: "This is the first lecture I've given you." He admits he is not always good at giving advice and appeals to her understanding: "I'm not good at advice / You know that." Remembering that his daughter had reminded him of her age, "'sweet sixteen'," he now steps outside of the role of father he tells her it would be easier to talk to her if she were a friend and not a daughter: "I'd rather be your closest friend / than your father." He justifies his ineptness in the role of father by saying he is better at "rid[ing] the ceremonies / until they grow dark." The switch to metaphor suggests again his own awareness of the difficulty of his position. He is aware it is easier to observe the formalities of his role as a father, even though they may be inappropriate at this stage of her life.

In the fifth short stanza the situation between father and daughter clarifies. The poet puts ceremony aside and frankly tells his daughter what is bothering him. "You are so busy / discovering your friends /I ache with loss." The poet understands it is entirely normal for a sixteen year old to want to spend her time with her friends, but he also realizes she is growing away from him. He knows it is "greed" on his part to continue to want her to be the child. In an attempt to breech their differences he acknowledges that he, too, is guilty for the space between them, that he sometimes draws away from her by going into his own "purple world" and "lost" her. The poet's "purple world" is equivalent to his daughter's "purple moods" in the first stanza, a trait they both share, though in his case it also suggests periods of time he has withdrawn into his writing.

The use of the word "purple" intentionally shows his awareness of the emotional alienating effects of withdrawal.

In the sixth stanza the poet recalls a particular poignant moment, a day he had stepped into her room while she was "busy with mathematics." For the poet the moment resonated with meaning and he expresses it, as a poet would, through metaphor. He recalls her sitting at her desk, the desk he "now writes this," with "the forsythia outside the window" and the sun spilling over her "like a thick yellow miracle." The forsythia is a harbinger of spring and suggestive of new life; the miracle is the fact of his daughter's life. The poet saw the bright yellow of the sun and forsythia pulling her like "another planet" and "coaxing" her "out of the house," though she was oblivious "busy with mathematics." For the poet the moment represented his awareness of that fact that his daughter is growing away from him into her own life, "all those possible worlds!" He sees all the possibilities before her. Recalling the moment leads the poet to sentimental hyperbole as he writes: "I cannot look at forsythia now / without loss or joy of you."

At this point the poet steps back again into the role of father offering her further advice, this time from his own experience. He resorts again to figurative language to make his point by telling her that she will "step delicately into the wild world" where her "real prize

will be / the frantic search." For the poet the "frantic search" is what drives a person on to find something, yet he knows now that the search itself is more important than the "prize" itself. There is a certain irony in the comment from a father who has won his fair share of prizes for his writing. Having won prizes, however, he knows the real value is not in the prize but in the process of creating. He tells her to "want everything" in the journey. The poet reiterates what he has told her in stanza three, which is quite simply to open herself to all experiences. Only in this way will she grow and change.

The poet is aware of the danger in his advice. By telling her to "want everything," he knows there are times she will be disappointed and times she will fail. The syntax in the line "Want everything. If you break / break going out not in" connects wanting everything to the risk of pain and possible breakdown; yet he would rather that she take the risk and live her life to its fullest. The suggestion recalls his previous allusion to the siren and his advice, "if you hear the siren / listen to it." Rather than withdrawing and avoiding risk for fear of failure, he advises her to take risks suggesting it is better to fail than withdraw and suffer a different form of failure and pain in the form of loneliness and isolation. Having offered his advice the poet once again steps back and qualifies his comments. "How you live your life I don't care." No matter how she chooses to live her life he will always love her and be her friend: "I'll sell my arms for you / hold your secrets forever."

In the final stanza the poet's mood becomes solemn as he addresses his final point. He returns to the role of father this time to put her fears at ease on a subject that has been troubling her. He begins almost apologetically, as if he were reluctant to bring the subject up: "If I speak of death / which you fear now, greatly / it is without answers." His advice is honest; there are no answers to something that is a fact of each person's life. He offers no philosophical or spiritual consolations. Instead he tells her "each / one we know is / in our blood." He suggests that she take consolation in the fact that only the physical state ends in death, not the connection to another, which lives one. He tells her not to "recall graves" but to remember life instead. He reminds her of the power of memory, which is "permanent," and points to his own memory of her, "the afternoon's / yellow suburban annunciation." The memory is of the afternoon he saw her surrounded by forsythia with the sun shining on her. The moment is etched forever in his mind and has taken on a symbolic significance as the moment he knew he was losing her. In the final lines he reminds her of the importance of keeping her gaze on the living, "your goalie / in his frightening mask" and to look to the future and whatever surprises it may bring, her goalie, for instance, who "dreams perhaps of gentleness."

Ondaatje's poem to his sad daughter is in fact a love letter that is at different time wistful, challenging, didactic, and gentle. It addresses a changing relationship between a father and the daughter as the father comes to terms with her move towards adulthood and independence. It is a moving tribute that shows his own weaknesses and insecurity as he maneuvers between his role of father and what he hopes will be a growing friendship. It is a testament to the power of love.

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

Adaptations

An audio cassette of *The English Patient* is available from Random House (Audio) in an abridged edition. The tape is narrated by Michael Ondaatje and the reader is Michael York.

Two cassettes containing Michael Ondaatje reading his entire *Running in the Family* is available from Random House (Audio). The tapes run a total of three hours.

Topics for Further Study

Pretend you are the parent of a daughter turning sixteen and you want to give her something special for her birthday. You decide to write her a letter as a "gift" of advice for her future. What would your letter say?

Consider the encouragement to "Want everything" and write an essay on how children who take this advice seriously will lead their adult lives.

Your hometown is trying to raise funds for a professional women's hockey team. Write a letter to the newspaper editor thoroughly explaining your feelings for or against the new team.

Write a poem that begins with the lines: When I thought of having sons/ this isn't what I thought.

Compare and Contrast

1982: A Supreme Court decision *inMississippi University for Women v. Hogan* finds that an all-female state supported nursing school that denied admission to a male is unconstitutional.

1997-98: The Virginia Military Institute is ordered by the U.S. Supreme Court to accept women into its program after its all-male policy was found unconstitutional.

1981: In what was called a "fairy tale" match, Prince Charles of England marries Lady Diana Spencer while millions watched on TV.

1996: Prince Charles and Princess Diana divorce; Diana is killed in a car crash one year later.

1978: The world's first test-tube baby is born in London to mom Lesley Brown.

1997: Scottish geneticists announce the successful cloning of a sheep and name her Dolly.

What Do I Read Next?

By the time Michael Ondaatje published his collection of poems called *Rat Jelly* in 1973, he had already developed a reputation as a writer unafraid of taking chances with both descriptive language and subject matter. This book carries on that bent with what may be the precursor to some of the subjects in *Secular Love* in poems that deal with living with a wife who has been married before and in being the son of a temperamental, alcoholic father.

In addition to novels, plays, and collections of poems, Ondaatje has also published book-length poems, or epics, one in 1970 called *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid.* This well-received publication explores the history of the young gunslinger in both fact and fiction, told primarily from Billy's point of view. Ondaatje provides interesting, colorful twists to the typical "Billy the Kid" story.

Because Michael Ondaatje relies so heavily on real-life accounts and personal relationships as inspiration for his work, it is worth having a better understanding of "where he's coming from"□literally. *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fraticide and the Dismantling of Democracy,* written by Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah and published in 1991, details the events leading up to and the continued fighting between the two most prominent political factions in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. The struggles are religious, cultural, and political in nature, and this book does a good job examining the reasons for so many deaths in this small island nation.

The daughter in Ondaatje's poem makes icons of hockey players, but we are not sure whether she has any inclinations to play the sport herself. Many women have, and *Too Many Men on the Lee: Women's Hockey in North America* (Joanna Avery, Glynis Peters, Julie Anne Stevens; 1998) explores the history of women's hockey in the U.S. and Canada, including the 1998 Olympic gold medal for the U.S. team in Nagano. Although there has been little recognition of, and even less support for, women playing this "man's" sport, there were actually female college teams as early as the 1920s.

While much has been written on mother-daughter and father-son bonds, not too much literature has appeared on the opposite relationship□sat least not much in a "positive" vein. In 1998, editors Dewitt Henry and James Alan McPherson put together a collection of essays highlighting the ties between fathers and daughters in *Fathering Daughters: Reflections by Men.* This book is filled with touching and intriguing, not always happy, accounts by fathers who reveal some of their most personal, provocative feelings about their female children. From one man's refusal to "baby talk" with his infant to another's worrying about his daughter's political consciousness to a third recounting a vacation he took with a daughter dying of leukemia□this is a sensitive collection of work on parenting girls and young women from the father's point of view.

Sirens may appear in only one line of "To a Sad Daughter," but the impact of its meaning is crucial to the poem. Meri Franco-Lao discusses the history and celebration of the allure of sirens and mermaids over 3000 years of art and literature in her *Sirens:*

Symbols of Seduction, published in 1997. With a mixture of text, photos, and illustrations, Franco-Lao depicts the ongoing love affair between some of the world's greatest writers, artists, and poets and the mythological creatures who almost enticed Ulysses to an early demise with their sweet, bewitching songs.

Further Study

Davey, Frank, *From Here to There: A Guide to English Canadian Literature since 1960,* Erin, Ontario: Porcepic, 1974.

Davey presents a very colorful review of Ondaatje's poetry, claiming his poems "reverberate with exotic violence," and contain "a strong photographic element." He calls the poet's work "superbly tense, multicolor, explosive, [and] macabre."

Marshall, Tom, *Harsh and Lovely Land: The Major Canadian Poets and the Making of a Canadian Tradition,* Vancouver: Univ. ofBritish Columbia Press, 1979.

This book offers a good overall look at Canadian literature, both past and at the time of publication. It is interesting to read about Ondaatje's work among his Canadian contemporaries, and he is cited as one of those poet-novelists who "seek to depict in fiction rather than in epic verse a world of primal psychic conflict, a dark underground of the soul."

Ondaatje, Michael, *Running in the Family,* New York: W.W.Nortron & Co., 1982.

Considering the real-life experiences examined in "To a Sad Daughter," it is beneficial and enlightening to read the poet's own creative autobiography dealing with the lives of his father and mother in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). This book tells the tale of broken engagements, drunken suicide attempts, and of parties where wealthy revelers tango in the jungle.

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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:

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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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