To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time Study Guide

To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time by Robert Herrick

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Introduction

First published in 1648 in a volume of verse entitled *Hesperides,* "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" is perhaps one of the most famous poems to extol the notion of carpe diem. Carpe diem, or "seize the day," expresses a philosophy that recognizes the brevity of life and therefore the need to live for and in the moment. Seizing the day means eating, drinking and making merry for tomorrow we shall all die. The phrase was used by classicists such as Horace, and its spirit marks the theme of Herrick's lyric poem. Echoing Ben Jonson's poem, "Song: To Celia," the speaker of the poem underscores the ephemeral quality of life and urges those in their youth to actively celebrate life and its pleasures; however, the speaker does not urge "the virgins" simply to frolic adulterously, but to seek union in matrimony, thereby uniting the natural cycles of life and death with the rites and ceremonies of Christian worship. Although a very common theme in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century verse, and particularly in Cavalier poetry, the association of Christianity and carpe diem is not a traditional one; it is unique to Herrick and perhaps "natural" given Herrick's thirty-two year career as vicar of Dean Prior, an appointment originally bestowed by King Charles I. Written during a period of great political unrest that culminated in Britain's Civil War, the theme and the sage advice proffered by the speaker of the poem appears appropriate in this particularly transient period. The carpe diem spirit, however, has translated to modern times and is the theme of Henry James's *The Ambassadors* and Robert Frost's "Carpe Diem."

Author Biography

Herrick was born in the Cheapside district of London in August of 1591. He was the seventh child and fourth son of Julia Stone Herrick and Nicholas Herrick, a goldsmith who died when his son was only a year old. In 1607, Herrick became an apprentice to his uncle, also a goldsmith. He entered Cambridge University in 1613, graduating in 1620 with a master of arts degree. Herrick was ordained a minister in 1623 and four years later served as a chaplain in the Duke of Buckingham's Isle of Rhe expedition, a failed attempt to come to the aid of Protestants in predominantly Catholic France. It is believed he spent much of his time during the next several years among the social and literary circles of London, earning a reputation as a fashionable poet. He became known as one of the Sons of Ben, a group of poets greatly influenced by the work of Ben Jonson. In 1629 King Charles I appointed Herrick the vicar of Dean Prior in Devonshire. During the English Civil War, Herrick was a supporter of the monarchy, and in 1647 the Puritans, who had come to power, expelled him from his vicarage. He returned to London in 1660, the year the monarchy was restored. At that time Charles II sent him back to Dean Prior, where he remained until his death in October of 1674.

Poem Text

Gather ye Rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a flying:
And this same flower that smiles to day,
To morrow will be dying.

The glorious Lamp of Heaven, the Sun,
The higher he's a getting;
The sooner will his Race be run,
And neerer he's to Setting.

That Age is best, which is the first,
When Youth and Blood are warmer;
But being spent, the worse, and worst
Then be not coy, but use your time;

And while ye may, goe marry:
For having lost but once your prime,
You may for ever tarry.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

In the opening stanza, the poet articulates the carpe diem tenet that urges one to "Seize the Day." The gathering of roses is a metaphor for living life to the fullest. The image of roses suggests a number of things: roses symbolize sensuality and the fulfillment of earthly pleasures; as vegetation, they are tied to the cycles of nature and represent change and the transience of life. Like the "virgins," the roses are buds, fresh, youthful and brimming with life; youth, like life, however, is fleeting. Marked by brevity, life is such that one day one experiences joy, as suggested by the smiling flower, and the next day death. The poet underscores the ephemeral quality of human life. Like the rose, the virgins whom the speaker addresses, and beyond them the reader of the text, are destined to follow the same fate as the rose.

Lines 5-8

Here the poet expands on the image of fleeting time and the brevity of life. The movement of the sun in the sky underscores the passing of time as the sun has functioned quite literally as a time- piece since ancient times (think of a sundial). Traditionally, the sun is an image of warmth, light and vitality: it is a life-giving force, nurturing growth in nature. However, the setting of the sun is a foreboding image that lends dark undertones to the poem: it is a traditional symbol of death. Like the rose, the personified sun and his progress across the sky stand as a metaphor for humankind and its ultimate fate.

Lines 9-12

In the third stanza, the speaker of the poem offers sage wisdom, which appears to have been acquired through life experience, to the naive virgins. Noting that youth, the time when one's blood is "warm" and desires and passions are readily stirred, is the "best" time of one's life, evokes the notion of carpe diem, and implies that one should celebrate this moment in life by indulging in it. However, in the final two lines of the stanza, the speaker introduces an unusually ironic and decidedly unromantic twist to the notion of pursuing love by suggesting that love is not a means by which one can escape death. Rather, the realist suggests that love must be pursued as it plays a role in life. It does not deter death, as suggested in lines eleven and twelve, but it does occupy a particular and significant place in one's life journey whose ultimate end is death.

Lines 13-16

The final stanza of the poem unites the natural cycles of life and death with the rites and ceremonies of Christian worship, thereby introducing a unique element to the carpe

diem poem. Here the speaker urges the virgins, who represent all those who are young and inexperienced, to pursue love and the "natural" union of matrimony that ensues within the Christian world. By urging marriage, the speaker introduces a religious and moral element to the pursuit of pleasure and the immediate gratification of one's desires that the tenet of carpe diem suggests.

Themes

Carpe Diem

The Latin phrase "carpe diem" means "seize the day." The "carpe diem" philosophy holds that one's time on earth is shorter than one thinks and therefore must be held on to for as long as possible; those who subscribe to such a philosophy tend to value the present more than the unchangeable past or uncertain future. This attitude toward "living deep" and "sucking the marrow out of life" (as Henry David Thoreau phrased it) is a favorite theme of Herrick's and, indeed, of many seventeenth- century poets. "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" epitomizes the "carpe diem" philosophy by urging its readers□specifically, the young and naive "virgins" of the title□to make the most of the present before their youths have passed. The opening line, "Gather ye rose-buds while ye may," uses the symbol of the rosebuds to command the virgins to symbolically "seize" all the romantic experience they can because "Old time is still a-flying." "Still" in this context means "always," and the speaker stresses the fact that (as the saying goes) "time flies" forever. The present brings flowers that "smile" with the joy of their own beauty as well as the "glorious lamp of Heaven, the Sun," but, like everything else, these too will fade as time progresses. In a short span of time□indeed, in a span that seems as short as a single day□the flowers will "be dying" and the sun's "race" will be "run." As Feste, the clown in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night,* sings, "Youth's a stuff will not endure."

The speaker argues that, of all the "ages" or stages through which a human life passes, the one in which the virgins find themselves now is the "best." According to him, their "youth and blood are warmer": their enthusiasm and emotions are at their highest point, and should be exploited in the search for love. Once their finite amount of youthfulness is "spent," their lives will only become "worse" until they reach old age, described here as the "worst" part of human life. However, if the virgins *do* remain "coy" and flirtatious without any intention of committing themselves to husbands, the speaker argues that they will eventually reach a stage at which their only option is to "forever tarry" as old maids, regretful of the time they had wasted that they can never retrieve. To the speaker, adopting the "carpe diem" philosophy is the virgins'only option.

The Transient Nature of Beauty

Age is commonly regarded as a bringer of wisdom, a notion with which Herrick would most likely agree. What one gains in wisdom, however, is countered by what one loses in terms of physical attractiveness. Whereas such an emphasis on one's physical self may seem shallow to some readers, the speaker of "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" emphasizes the idea that physical beauty, like youth, is a commodity that lasts for a short period before fading and never returning. The virgins are advised to gather rosebuds because the rose is an immediately recognizable symbol of beauty; had the speaker urged his readers to "Gather ye orchids while ye may," his intention would be

less apparent. In the same vein, the speaker describes the sun as the "glorious lamp of heaven"□a thing of divine beauty□only then to remark that "neerer he's to setting." Although a contrary reader may argue that more rosebuds will bloom and the sun will rise again, Herrick's point is that physical beauty is like a *single* rosebud and a *single* day, gone forever once its time has passed. Whereas other rosebuds will bloom and other days will dawn, physical beauty is not everlasting. The virgins themselves are the ones actually "dying" here.

The poem ends with a reiteration of the importance of physical beauty for those coy virgins who have yet to marry. When they have "lost but once" their "prime," they "may forever tarry." Any individual's physical "prime" exists for a set number of days; the phrase "lost but once" implies that once this prime has passed, it is forever gone. At that point, the stubborn virgins may "forever tarry" (as they are now) because they will have lost their physical beauty and with it their desirability to men. Thus, the speaker, through his offer of an ironic possibility, attempts to frighten the virgins into considering the ephemeral nature of the beauty, which they presumably (and wrongfully) regard as fixed and eternal.

Style

"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" is composed of four stanzas, each consisting of four lines of verse. Each stanza is composed of a single sentence. The poem employs end rhymes, the rhyming pattern being *abab, cdcd, efef, ghgh.*

In this poem, Herrick favors the trochaic foot, a unit of two syllables in which the first syllable is stressed and the second is unstressed. Scanning the first line of the poem, written in tetrameter form, reveals the dominance of this unit:

Ga ther / ye *rose*
/ buds *while*
/ ye *may.*

Trochaic feet are often difficult to use in a long poem as they tend to create a rocking rhythm. They are appropriate in this short poem with its short line length, where the brevity of form echoes the speaker's awareness of the brevity of life that underlies the poem's theme.

Historical Context

The English Civil War

Although a reader of his poetry may not suspect it, the world in which Herrick lived and wrote was one marked, in great part, by the chaos of war. In 1637, King Charles I attempted to legally force the Scots to adopt the Anglican liturgy in place of their favored Presbyterian one. The Scots, understandably outraged, protested and eventually gathered an army that, by 1640, was bordering the northern counties of England. Refusing to back down, Charles I summoned the Long Parliament and petitioned them for money with which he could finance a war against the Scots; the Long Parliament agreed but insisted on a number of reforms in what the Puritans among them saw as a corrupted monarchy. After two years of bitter disagreements, both Charles and the Long Parliament raised armies and began the English Civil War in 1642, generally fought between the "cavaliers" (Royalists who supported Charles I) and the "roundheads" (Puritans who sought to defend the powers of Parliament).

During the years and battles that followed, one Parliamentary soldier emerged as a fierce enemy and master tactician: Oliver Cromwell. A rugged and ruthless commander, Cromwell earned the name Ironsides for his cavalry regiment and eventually defeated Charles's forces at the Battle of Naseby in 1645. This defeat□coupled with another at the hands of the Scots□led to Charles's surrender and eventual execution in 1649. After Charles's execution, Cromwell ruled England as Lord Protector until his death in 1658, although many historians argue that Cromwell became as intolerant a ruler as the king whom he had helped to overthrow. Cromwell's son, Richard, succeeded his father as Lord Protector until 1660, when General George Monck acted on behalf of many English people and brought Charles's son out of exile and onto the throne. Although tensions still existed between different religious sects and the English still argued over exactly how much power the king should have at his disposal, most agreed that the restoration of the monarchy was essential to ensure that the nation did not continue its era of unrest. Charles II reigned until his death in 1685.

Metaphysical and Cavalier Poetry

Much of the poetry that sprung from the seventeenth century can be classified as belonging to one of two genres: Metaphysical or Cavalier. The metaphysical poets (so named by the eighteenthcentury writer Samuel Johnson) explored complex philosophical issues in equally complex forms; poets like John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and George Herbert sought to investigate the workings of God through involved "conceits"□extended metaphors that often run through the length of an entire work. Metaphysical poetry is, naturally, dense and challenging, offering its readers intense (and sometimes almost scientific) examinations of abstract topics. Donne's "Batter My Heart, Three Person'd God" and "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" are two widely studied examples of metaphysical poetry.

The term cavalier refers politically to the followers of Charles I in the Civil War and to those poets who were associated with Charles's court; these poets evinced a more carefree attitude toward their subjects than their metaphysical contemporaries. Also known as the "Sons of Ben" (in homage to their idol, Ben Jonson), poets such as Thomas Carew, Sir John Suckling, and Herrick himself employed more sprightly meters and simpler forms than their metaphysical counterparts. Although cavalier poetry may strike a modern reader as less important than that produced by the metaphysicals, the cavalier poets are notable for their ability to handle complex issues in a deft and succinct manner. Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," for example, explores the fleeting nature of beauty and youth, like Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress", but in a more playful way.

Critical Overview

"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" has been recognized as an important poem that pushes beyond the boundary of the typical Cavalry lyric extolling "Carpe diem," to reflect a unique interpretation of this notion, one that unites two seemingly contradictory belief systems, pagan and Christian. In his book *Poetry and the Fountain of Light,* H. R. Swardson, discussing another carpe diem poem by Herrick entitled "Corinna's Going A-Maying," argues that the poem does not offer mirth and the embracing of experience as a complete and utter licence to certain freedoms, as many more typical carpe diem poems do, nor does it suggest a strict and rigid Christian moral code. Rather, it mediates between the two. While avoiding a narrow understanding of Christianity, the poem draws on "the undeniable wisdom in the Christian order of life, including its action within some lawful boundary and recognizing considerations that are entirely foreign to the classical carpe diem statement." This same observation may be applied to "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." In the end of the poem, the advice proffered is for the virgins to marry. Thus, Herrick is able to articulate the carpe diem attitude, encouraging individuals to "seize the day" with images that suggests passion and sexual vitality, while at the same time he draws this notion into "the Christian fold," an important consideration for a clergyman living in a society deeply influenced by Christianity.

Critic George Arms, commenting in *Explicator Cyclopedia,* furthers Swardson's observations, noting that familiarity with the poem and readers' twentieth-century perspective obscure the sudden turn the poem takes in the final stanza. The image the poem develops, of virgins seeking pleasurable experiences, does not lead one to expect the pious advice to marry at the end of the poem. This unexpected advice, Arms argues, both shocks and delights the reader. Arms suggests that Herrick, in his choice of terms such as "virgin," "lamp," and "heaven," may be alluding to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins found in Matthew 25:1-13: "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins." If this is so, the distinction between the religious advice offered at the end of the poem and the encouragement to indulge in seemingly pagan revelry is great. Pagan imagery, Karl P. Wentersdorf notes in *Studia Neophilologica,* marks Herrick's texts in a significant way. For instance, the rosebud image is linked to Dionysus, the god of wine and vegetation, who also represents fertility and life. This allusion and the classic carpe diem notion suggest a pagan or non-Christian order or belief system. Yet the poem clearly ends with an exhortation to marry. Those who disregard the Christian ethics, which locates passion within marriage, are the foolish virgins who clearly stand outside the Christian order.

Criticism

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

Moran is an educator specializing in British and American literature. In this essay, he explains how the speaker of "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" urges his "virgin" readers to marry and view the passing of time as a threat.

Although William Wordsworth is universally acknowledged as the foremost British poet of nature (with Robert Frost serving as his American counterpart), Robert Herrick certainly stands as an earlier poet who employed nature to meet his artistic ends. Worsdworth, of course, became incredibly famous in his own lifetime for poems such as "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" (1798), "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1807) and "The World Is Too Much with Us" (1807)—all masterpieces in which the complex relationship between humans and the natural world is explored. Herrick never enjoyed such great success, but his volume *Hesperides* (1648) teems with poems that, while not at the same level of sophistication as Wordsworth's, nevertheless invite the reader to consider the ways in which the natural world offers countless metaphors and symbols through which human themes become apparent. Poems such as "To Blossoms," "To Daffodils," "Corrina's Gone a-Maying," and "Upon a Delaying Lady" stress the thematic connection between the human and natural worlds. Unlike Wordsworth, however, whose issues are as diverse as the colors of leaves in the fall, Herrick almost always returns to a central theme, epitomized by his "All Things Decay and Die":

All things decay with time: the forest sees
The growth and downfall of her aged trees;
That timber tall, which threescore lusters stood
The proud dictator of the state-like wood,
I mean (the sovereign of all plants) the oak,
Droops, dies, and falls without the cleaver's stroke.

Although he saw the natural world as a source of beauty, Herrick also knew that even the mightiest members of that world eventually fall prey to an enemy far more ruthless than any "cleaver": time. Even the greatest temporal power (of, for example, a "proud dictator" or "sovereign") is weak in the face of the passing years.

Read in this context, Herrick's best-known poem, "To the Virgins to Make Much of Time," stands as another example of Herrick's primary artistic concern. Although a modern reader may find the imagery and diction a trifle too quaint and the meter a bit too singsong and cute, Herrick does employ in the poem the technique of "nodding to nature" from which Wordsworth would fashion his career over a century later.

The word "Virgins" here literally refers to young, chaste women who have yet to find husbands; the poem can thus be read as a rallying cry to these delinquent maids, urging them to find suitable mates in the interest of the species as a whole. However, the word "virgin" also carries the connotation of a naive, innocent youth. Both senses are meant here, since, on the surface, the poem urges these girls to marry—but also

urges them to recognize the unstoppable force of time. The virgins of the title are uninitiated both sexually and philosophically, and the speaker's aim is to persuade them to have their bodies and minds "deflowered" before they pass the point where the loss of both literal and figurative virginity will be meaningless: an old virgin cannot bear children, nor can she make up for the time she lost in being coy.

As previously mentioned, Herrick looks to the natural world for a host of symbols that allow him to effectively make his case to his virgin readers. The poem's opening stanza presents the rosebud as a symbol of experience, specifically, the experience that involves falling in love and losing one's sexual innocence. Note that the flower is a "bud": a soon-to-blossom rose that, hopefully like the virgins themselves, will no longer hide its beauty from the world. Herrick's use of "smiles" (rather than "blooms") emphasizes the joy that will accompany the virgins' own blossoming into wives. That "same flower," however, will be dying "Tomorrow"; the speaker does not literally mean the day after its blossom, but is compressing the life of the flower to a single day to emphasize the short time nature allows all things to live (like the "proud dictator" mentioned above). Time is personified as "Old" yet "flying"□a paradoxical notion since "old" does not suggest the speed associated with "flying." In comparison to any mortal thing, however, time is, in a sense, both "old" (having existed forever) and "flying" (a person's youth passes quickly). The rhyming of "flying" (suggesting the quick passage of time) and "dying" (suggesting one's removal from time) reinforces the idea that time moves swiftly to one clear and unpleasant end.

As the first stanza presents rosebuds as symbols of marital experience, the second offers the sun as a symbol of the unstoppable progress of time. Calling the sun "the glorious lamp of heaven" emphasizes its beauty, yet, like the "flowers" of the first stanza, the beauty here is ephemeral; eventually, the sun will set and leave the world□and the coy virgins□in physical and emotional darkness. As Herrick compresses the life of a rosebud to a day, here he does the same with the span of the virgins' youth. Of course, nobody's youth lasts for only a day, but measured against a span of time as long as a human life, youth is certainly ephemeral and short-lived; it *seems* like a single day in retrospect. By speaking of the "race" that the sun runs every day, Herrick again stresses the "flying" speed of time: "And neerer he's to setting," the speaker warns, hoping that the virgins will see the symbolic importance of a common natural phenomenon. The rhyming words "sun" / "run" and "getting" / "setting" emphasize in the reader's ear this notion that time moves quickly and without any possible impediments.

The third stanza marks a change in the speaker's approach: while the first half of the poem uses symbols to make his point in a less obvious way, the second shows an increased earnestness on the speaker's part, which is conveyed in a more direct and even threatening tone. He begins by telling the virgins that they are in the "best" age of their lives, "When youth and blood are warmer." The idea of "warm-blooded youth" is a commonplace; young people are said to have "warm" blood because of the intensity of their emotions. However, such a remark also suggests that human life is a gradual frost, a dropping of bodily temperature and emotional excitement that ultimately results in death, when a person is, quite literally, physically and emotionally cold. The rhyming of "first" with the eventual "worst" stresses this inevitability. The second half of the stanza

suggests that the "age" of youth will be "spent": everybody has a finite supply of youthfulness that can (and undoubtedly will) be used up. Once such a supply is depleted, all a person can expect are "worse, and worst / Times." Rosebuds die, the sun sets, blood turns cold; the innocent virgins are no longer being coddled by the speaker, who bluntly informs them that the sands in their biological, marital and emotional hourglasses are spilling faster and faster. Again the rhymes stress the point: one's "former" age is "warmer" than the one to which she is rapidly moving.

By the poem's end, the speaker has moved away from his initial use of nature as a means of persuasion to the language of direct command. The lines, "Then be not coy, but use your time / And, while ye may, go marry" gain force from their thirteen monosyllabic words leading up to "marry" and recall the idea that youth exists in a finite supply: like anything else that can spoil with time, youth must be "used" in a very practical sense. The speaker's commands can all be reduced to short phrases ("be not coy," "use your time," "go marry"), emphasizing what he sees as simple, undeniable truths. But this speaker is still not satisfied that he has made his point, so he resorts to sarcasm: "For, having lost but once your prime, / You may forever tarry." Once you have passed the window of opportunity, when your physical beauty has faded, the speaker argues, You can delay all you like□*because no one will want you.* "Marry" now or "tarry" later is drummed into the virgins' ears by way of rhyme. This may irk or offend some readers, who find the implication that physical beauty is crucial to a woman's finding a husband to be chauvinistic or even barbarous; however, many readers would agree that during one's youth, physical attraction can often lead to relationships. Beauty may be what initially brings two people together and beauty will indeed fade□but, with any luck, the marriage will not, and if the speaker feels the need to resort to language more direct than that of his opening stanzas, surely he is doing so to make what he sees as an important point.

A lesser-known poem of Herrick's, "Best to Be Merry," distills the issues of "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" into a very concentrated piece of verse:

Fools are they, who never know
How the times away do go;
But for us, who wisely see
Where the bounds of black death be,
Let's live merrily, and thus
Gratify the Genius.

The "Fools" here are like the "Virgins" in Herrick's other poem, unaware of "black death's" approach. "The times away do go," and the only possible remedy is to "Gratify the Genius" of the age: find a mate with whom one can gather rosebuds and *then* tarry□but not alone.

Source: Daniel Moran, Critical Essay on "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Ketteler has taught literature and composition. In this essay, she focuses on the way Herrick uses the carpe diem theme and how this traditional literary motif is influenced by gender considerations.

One of the most well-remembered and oftquoted lines in all of English poetry, "Gather ye Rose-buds while ye may," opens Robert Herrick's poem, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." Critics have often described this work as a "carpe diem" poem. Herrick is not alone in his use of this literary motif; in fact, many seventeenth-century English poets embraced the idea of carpe diem, meaning "seize the day" in Latin. Critic Roger Rollin goes as far as to say that this is the poem "that has fixed the concept of carpe diem in the popular imagination forever." The underlying message in the poem appears to be one of uplift: waste no time; live your life to the fullest each day and embrace the moment.

In addition, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," is highly readable. It rolls off the tongue, so to speak, with regular rhyme and meter, almost in a singsong way. But embedded in the poem are more serious themes□such as death and decay, the fleeting nature of youth, and sexuality□which seem to be contrary to the simplistic nature of the form. What readers have, then, is a poem whose form belies its content, and this is further complicated if readers think about Herrick's intended audience for the poem.

The seventeenth century was a tumultuous time in England, with a civil war that overthrew the monarchy and then a restoration that placed the monarchy back in power. While not overtly political in his poems, Herrick belonged to a group of poets, known as the "Cavaliers," who supported the monarchy. Sir John Suckling, Richard Lovelace, and Thomas Carew were also Cavalier poets, and all were deeply influenced by poet and playwright Ben Jonson. Herrick and the Cavaliers were known for writing lyrical love poems.

Where Herrick differs from his contemporaries, however, is in his use of Christianity□ blended with traditional Pagan rituals□as an overriding theme in his love poetry, and especially in "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." It's no coincidence that Herrick served as a parish priest for almost twenty years. His Christian message is not overbearing in the poem, but it is significant that he advises young women to "goe marry,"□a holy sacrament, or Christian ritual. At the same time, he is sensitive to the natural rhythms and rituals of the earth. Specifically he speaks of the "glorious Lamp of Heaven, the Sun, / The higher he's a getting." Here, Herrick is hinting at Pagan tradition and mythology, which involve worshiping the sun. Time itself, which is always spelled with a capital "T" in the poem, is also part of the natural life cycle. Embracing the moment means embracing both Christian and Pagan rituals.

Herrick often brings together two disparate ideas or themes in interesting ways□a literary practice that is peppered throughout seventeenthcentury poetry. "A sharpened awareness of the complex and contradictory nature of experience seems to be the

feature which most generally characterizes the seventeenth-century poets," observe literary critics Alexander Witherspoon and Frank Warnke. In other words, experience is too multidimensional to present in a straightforward, one-dimensional manner; life is full of dilemmas and paradoxes; even the way people think is associative□ one thing reminds them of another, or one thing depends upon another. In short, life is becoming more complicated in the seventeenth century, and literature is reflecting the modernization of the world. It makes sense that Herrick would present a poem of contrasts to capture the life/death paradox, and, as suggested earlier, the very form and content contrast with one another. What, then, is Herrick saying in "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" and why is it significant that he chooses to say it in the way he does?

Many seventeenth-century poets used "wit" to address the paradoxes of life. Wit, or "the ability to perceive similarities among dissimilar entities or experiences" (Witherspoon and Warnke), is one technique for presenting the contrasts of life. Herrick has his own kind of wit, not so much in that he practices literary ingenuity, weaving seemingly unconnected metaphors together to shock or surprise the reader; rather, his wit comes from his ability to use a lighthearted, conventional, lyric style□ one seemingly more suited for love poems□to address the paradoxes of life, and especially, the paradox of womanhood.

Immediately, the reader feels a sense of urgency in the first stanza of the poem. The first word of the poem, "gather," is not only an action verb; it is a command to the virgins. The speaker directs the women to gather rosebuds, symbolic of beauty, love, and newness. "While ye may," is a qualifier; it suggests a limit on the gathering of rosebuds both because they may not always be available in plenty for gathering and because the reader may not always have the energy and ability needed for gathering. In the same breath, the speaker provides an explanation for this need to hurry: "Old Time is still a flying." "Time" takes on a human persona, a kind of Father Time, who is a tangible thing, and is moving forward, literally flying. "Old" and "Still" suggest time's movement is ancient and constant. Unlike the opportunity for gathering rosebuds□ which will soon vanish□time knows no limits; it keeps moving forward as it always has and always will.

The first stanza closes out with another set of contrasts: "And this same flower that smiles today / To morrow will be dying." Herrick again uses the garden motif, personifying the flower. Though it stands tall and "smiles" or blooms now, death is imminent. Herrick is laying out the cycle of life, with the express purpose to show that death is part of the cycle of life. The flower almost takes on human characteristics, which connect humanity to the cycle of life and death. People are part of nature, and every minute that they live, they are one minute closer to dying.

The second stanza continues with the natural cycle motif, bringing in the sun. Like time, the sun has an ancient quality□it is dependable, and it is the way in which time is measured. "The glorious Lamp of Heaven, the Sun, / The higher he's a getting; / The sooner will his Race be run, / And neerer he's to Setting." As aforementioned, Herrick is pulling in Christian imagery, blending it with imagery from the world of nature. He

connects the cycles of the sun to Christianity: the sun is not the lamp of the sky but the lamp of heaven. Herrick scholar Roger Rollin addresses the irony of this stanza: "It begins to appear that irony is a law of nature in the cosmos as in a rose garden; the nearer things are to their apogee, the closer they approach the slide down to their perigee." This is simply the way the world is ordered□and even the sun, with far more power and, readers are to believe, a kind of "wisdom," is not immune.

The third stanza further spells out the paradox of youth. "Youth and Blood" are "warmer"; innocence, then, is to be cherished. In using the word "spent" to describe the passing of time, time seems a commodity. Indeed, time is traded for experience; but once it is gone, it can never be regained. "But being spent, the worse, and worst / times, still succeed the former." Too, readers should remember that this poem is addressed to young women, who find themselves in drastically different conditions than young men of the day. The time when "Youth and Blood are warmer" is the time of beauty and innocence. In the popular imagination, a woman must maintain her beauty and her innocence and virtue to attract a man. But if time slips away, and a woman hasn't attracted a man, her beauty will fade, and her economic situation may become perilous. Unless she is of a prominent family and class, the seventeenth-century woman has limited opportunities. What does it mean, then, to "seize the day" when your options are limited by gender?

Whether Herrick wanted to debate the politics of gender is in itself a debate. His last stanza can be read in different ways: "Then be not coy, but use your time; / And while ye may, goe marry: / For having lost but once your prime, / You may for ever tarry." "Coy" in this context means a kind of reservation and modesty, or more appropriately, pretended shyness. Again, readers have the repetition of "while ye may"□first, "while ye may, gather rosebuds," and in this stanza, "while ye may, go marry." "Prime" is another way of saying beauty and attraction, and forever "tarry" is rather a euphemistic phrase for spinsterhood.

Instructing women to seize the day by marrying while they are young and beautiful lest they become bitter spinsters seems quite problematic for the twenty-first-century reader. But readers are so far historically removed from the seventeenth century and the subtleties of the final lines of "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." Roger Rollin has shown a way to read the nuances between the lines: "The delaying tactics that social custom prescribes for them [the virgins] are self-defeating, threatening to waste life's most precious commodities□ time, youth, and love. 'Goe marry' can be taken merely as a euphemistic imperative to seek sexual liberation, but given the magisterial posture of the speaker, a literal interpretation is the most likely one: the virgins are encouraged to lose their virginity without delay but to lose it in an act of love that is socially sanctioned." Herrick was, after all, a parish priest. Whereas other seventeenth-century poets, such as John Donne and Andrew Marvell, have no problem directly addressing sexuality outside of marriage, Herrick seems to differ from them on this point.

Herrick's poem does not completely escape feminist inquiry, though. Even if the reader takes the viewpoint that "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" is about sexual liberation and not avoiding spinsterhood, questions still arise. The title, for example,

encourages virgins to make much of *time;* why not to make much of *life?* Why not pursue dreams, liberate oneself on other fronts? Fight for economic liberation so that one may be more in control of her destiny? Is the best reason for a woman to lose her virginity because time is running out? Is a woman really fully in control of her destiny and body then?

This kind of rereading can provide interesting feminist critiques. But as readers in the twenty-first century, people have to take the poem for what it is and evaluate its message according to the tradition out of which it is written. Not only does the poem have a distinctly Christian feel, it has a Cavalier feel to it as well. Herrick was part of the upper crust of society, a supporter of the monarchy and of traditional values. While conforming to a traditional, lyrical style, he tackles serious themes in this poem, and almost by default, this poem enters into a dialog about sexuality and gender. Three hundred years later, sexuality and gender considerations are still debated in both popular culture and literature.

Source: Judi Ketteler, Critical Essay on "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Perkins is an associate professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland. In the following essay, she examines Herrick's unique employment of the literary motif carpe diem in "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time."

Carpe diem, a Latin phrase from Horace's *Odes,* translates into "seize the day." The phrase has become a common literary motif, especially in lyric poetry and in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English love poetry. The most famous poems that incorporate this motif include Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen,* Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," Edward Fitzgerald's "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam," and Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." Modern writers have also employed the motif, most notably Henry James in *The Ambassadors* and "The Beast in the Jungle," and obviously Saul Bellow in *Seize the Day.*

Typically, the speaker in a poem that uses carpe diem as its theme proposes that since death is inevitable and time is fleeting, the listener, often a reluctant virgin, should take advantage of the sensual pleasures the speaker reveals to her. H. R. Swardson in "Herrick and the Ceremony of Mirth," notes that what makes Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" unique is its combination of Christian and classical traditions in its presentation of the carpe diem theme. The speaker in Herrick's poem begins on a traditional note, exhorting the listeners to "seize the day" by giving up their virginity; yet he recommends that they accomplish this only after they have married.

Most poems present a classical point of view in their expression of the carpe diem theme, reflecting the pagan spirit in nature as the speakers try to convince their listeners to give themselves up to sensual experience. For example, in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," the speaker's goal is to convince a young woman to join him and become like "amorous birds of prey" and "tear our pleasures with rough strife / Through the iron gates of life."

"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" begins in the same classical tradition. Its structure as well as its initial thematic proposal is traditional. The poem is a lyric composed of sixteen lines arranged into four stanzas. It is written in common, iambic meter with four stressed syllables in the first and third lines, three in the second and fourth.

The speaker in the first three stanzas suggests to his listeners, much like the speaker does in Marvell's poem, to "use your time" wisely by enjoying sexual love. Yet he also communicates the poignant sadness of the pursuit of pleasures as "old Time is still a-flying." Herrick uses the image of the rose in the first stanza in two traditional ways: as the symbol of beauty and of the transitory nature of life. Spenser also employs this image in *Faerie Queen* (II.xii.74-75) when the speaker suggests, "Gather therefore the Rose, whilst yet is prime."

Like the rosebuds, the virgins to whom the speaker in Herrick's poem addresses his words have not yet flowered. With this analogy, he suggests that if they give up their virginity, they will blossom into lovely roses. When he notes that the flowers "tomorrow will be dying," he reinforces his argument to his listeners that they must "make much of time" by experiencing pleasure before the opportunity passes. Whereas the inevitability of death is revealed in an almost gentle image of "old time . . . a flying" in the second line, its harsh reality emerges in the fourth when the speaker insists that the flowers will die soon after their blossoming. These images create an atmosphere of urgency. The speaker employs them to explain why he advises the virgins to gather the rosebuds "while ye may."

In the second stanza, Herrick reinforces this sense of urgency. The image of time flying in the first is echoed by the personification of the sun in the second as it runs its race in the heavens. The short life of both the flowers and the sun reflects the inevitability of death throughout nature. The sun as "the glorious lamp of heaven" is often used as it is here as a representation of life itself, its path from sunrise to sunset reflecting the stages of human life. As it sets, it seems to be dying, as did the roses, and, eventually, as will the virgins. Thus, the virgins should race against time, like the sun, to enjoy life to the fullest.

Roger B. Rollin, in his article on Herrick for *Twayne's English Authors Series Online,* notes that in the third stanza the speaker presents a two-part argument for his listeners. First, the stanza suggests, he explains, that "since human beings are subject to the law of atrophy," that they, like the roses will eventually decay and die, "youth, when growth is still taking place, has to be the optimum time of life." The "warmer blood" of youth suggests their heightened ability to feel and express passion, an ability that fades with age. Rollin notes that the second point the speaker makes here is that "the grand illusion of youth . . . is that it is forever, an illusion [he] curtly dispels with his image of adolescent heat soon giving way to the chill of age" and inevitable death. Marvell offers a similar message in "To His Coy Mistress" when his speaker slyly notes, "The grave's a fine and private place, / But none, I think, do there embrace."

Ironically, the new element that Herrick introduces in the last stanza reflects traditional Christian values. Typically in carpe diem poems, the impetus for the speaker's urging of young women to embrace their sexuality is his own pleasure as well as theirs, or it becomes an end in itself. However, in "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," while the speaker advises his listeners not to be coy and withdraw from sexual experience, he urges them to marry before they lose their virginity. The poem closes with a reinforcement of the speaker's main points: that since death is inevitable and time is fleeting, and since youth is the most vibrant time of life, the virgins should "seize the day." He suggests that if they do not grab this opportunity now, they may lose it forever.

Rollins suggests that the speaker proposes in the last stanza that "the delaying tactics that social custom prescribes for [the virgins] are self-defeating, threatening to waste life's most precious commodities time, youth, and love." The charge "Go marry," Rollins notes, could be interpreted as a "euphemistic imperative to seek sexual liberation." Yet, he suggests "given the magisterial posture of the speaker" the more

likely interpretation is that his purpose is to encourage the virgins "to lose their virginity without delay but to lose it in an act of love that is socially sanctioned."

Swardson argues that the poem stands out from traditional carpe diem poetry because in it, "some effort is made to assert the claims of one order of experience without denying the certain and recognized value of another order." He suggests that the "ceremonial quality" of the poem promotes "a ritual elevation, that helps give this experience a value beyond that of immediate pleasure."

In "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," Herrick presents a clever fusion of challenge to and support of social and religious doctrines: on the one hand, he defies custom when he encourages youth to openly embrace their sexuality; yet on the other, he upholds the belief that sexual knowledge should not be gained until one is married. Herrick's intermingling of the classical pagan call to experience fully the sensual pleasures of life with the traditional Christian attitude toward sexuality and marriage has produced a fresh and intriguing spin on the carpe diem poetic convention.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay excerpt, Rollin analyzes "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" to determine Herrick's poetic intent.

While it is only Herrick's "Corinna's Going AMaying" that can appropriately be compared with Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," it is the older poet's "To the Virgins, to make much of Time" that has fixed the concept of carpe diem in the popular imagination forever. Scholarly investigation has revealed that Herrick is heavily indebted to a variety of sources□some classical, some English□in this poem, but his synthesizing is so artful that the lyric's derivativeness is hardly noticeable. Not in the least pedantic, this poem has been so popular that its opening line has become proverbial:

1. Gather ye Rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a flying:
And this same flower that smiles today,
To morrow will be dying.

The admonition of the title and the image of time in flight convey some sense of urgency. However, even gathered, rosebuds are beautiful, and the personification, "Old Time," suggests a genial greybeard more than a grim reaper. The fact that this ancient is "a flying" almost makes him seem more comic than ominous. But then the ironically foreshortened image of the flower dying amid its smile manifestly darkens the mood even as it hints at the analogy between maidens and blossoms. That mood is intensified in the second stanza by an image which suggests that transiency is inherent in the cosmos as well as in sublunary nature:

2. The glorious Lamp of Heaven, the Sun,
The higher he's a getting;
The sooner will his Race be run,
And neerer he's to Setting.

The metaphoric first line of the stanza is pretentiously poetic compared to the colloquial character of stanza 1. Herrick's purpose is to inflate the eminence of the sun so that its decline, taken up in the last two lines, may seem even more swift and precipitous. It begins to appear that irony is a law of nature: in the comos as in a rose garden, the nearer things are to their apogee, the closer they approach the slide down to their perigee.

The object lesson to be drawn for the virgins from such natural phenomena is outlined in argumentative fashion in the two remaining stanzas. First, the girls are presented with a twofold proposition:

3. That Age is best, which is the first,
When Youth and Blood are warmer;

But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times, still succeed the former.

Since human beings are subject to the law of atrophy□*"All things decay and die"*□youth, when growth is still taking place, has to be the optimum time of life. The grand illusion of youth, however, is that it is forever, an illusion the virgins' lecturer curtly dispels with his image of adolescent heat soon giving way to the chill of age. His conclusion, then, becomes almost self-evident:

4. Then be not coy, but use your time;
And while ye may, goe marry:
For having lost but once your prime,
You may for ever tarry.

This last stanza makes it clear enough that to the speaker young women are coy by [custom or choice] rather than by nature. Their receptivity to love is under their control. The delaying tactics that social custom prescribes for them are self-defeating, threatening to waste life's most precious commodities□ time, youth, and love. "Goe marry" can be taken merely as euphemistic imperative to seek sexual liberation, but given the magisterial posture of the speaker a literal interpretation is the more likely one: the virgins are encouraged to lose their virginity without delay but to lose it in an act of love that is socially sanctioned.

Source: Roger Rollin, "Cleanly-Wantonnesse and 'This Sacred Grove': Themes of Love," in *Robert Herrick,* G. K. Hall, 1999.

Adaptations

"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" is one of the selections in *A Treasury of Great Poetry,* an audiocassette compilation released by Listening Library in 1986. The collection also features three other works by Herrick.

Topics for Further Study

Write a poem that explains why youth is better than age, using examples from nature to prove your point. Give your poem a light, buoyant, youthful tone, as Herrick does.

Compare this poem to "Virtue," by George Herbert. What is the perspective each poem takes toward death? Toward youth? Would the speaker in Herbert's poem agree with the one in Herrick's, or would he think that gathering rosebuds is pointless? Would Herrick's speaker agree with Herbert's?

How does the tone of the poem differ in the first and last stanzas? What does this tell you about the poem's speaker?

Compare and Contrast

1642: Over four hundred years after King John signs the Magna Carta, forever limiting by law the king's power, the English Civil War begins, fought between Parliamentary forces ("Roundheads") and Royalist supporters of King Charles I ("Cavaliers").

Today: The English monarch is a figurehead with no true legal authority; instead, the houses of Parliament are responsible for all legislation and the governing of the nation.

1642: All theaters in England are closed by order of the Puritans. They will remain closed until 1660, when the monarchy is restored and Charles II is placed on the throne.

Today: The English theater is regarded as one of the most influential and important in the world.

1648: Robert Herrick's *Hesperides* is published; the collection of poems features a number of works in which the relationship between the human and natural worlds is explored.

Today: The use of nature in British poetry is commonplace; twentieth-century poets such as D. H. Lawrence, Dylan Thomas, Ted Hughes, and Seamus Heaney have all written poems that employ natural symbols and metaphors for the human condition.

What Do I Read Next?

Like "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," Herrick's poem "To a Gentlewoman Objecting to His Gray Hairs" (1648) explores the effects of time on physical beauty.

Herrick's poem "To Blossoms" (1648) uses symbols found in the natural world to suggest the eventual decay and death of all living things.

"Upon a Delaying Lady" (1648), another of Herrick's carpe diem poems, features a speaker urging his lady to "come away" with him before his love turns to "frost or snow."

The poem "To His Coy Mistress" (1681) by Andrew Marvell, one of Herrick's contemporaries, also presents a speaker urging a young woman to adopt the "carpe diem" mentality but in a more metaphysical way than Herrick's.

John Donne's poem "The Flea" (1633) also features a speaker trying to woo a stubborn woman; the poem is remarkable for its humorous and complex metaphysical approach to the problem.

Christopher Marlowe's immensely popular "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" (1599) is a poem in which a male speaker tries to entice his love to live with him forever in a pastoral setting. Unlike the speaker of "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," however, the shepherd's reasoning is based on a love of beauty, rather than a fear of time.

The Irish poet William Butler Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1916) explores the theme of fleeting youth in a melancholy tone.

Further Study

Cannon, John, and Ralph Griffiths, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Monarchy,* Oxford University Press, 1988.

This comprehensive overview devotes approximately fifty pages to Charles I, the Civil War, and the Restoration.

Fowler, Alastair, *Robert Herrick,* Oxford University Press, 1980.

This lecture delivered to the British Academy examines the overall design of *Hesperides,* Herrick's volume of verse, as well as Herrick's use of the erotic and the natural in his work.

MacLeod, Malcolm, *A Concordance to the Poems of Robert Herrick,* Oxford University Press, 1936.

This book allows readers to locate every use of every word found in Herrick's poetry; for example, a reader could look up the word "rosebuds" and find the eight lines in Herrick's poems where the word occurs. This is a useful tool for examining the ways that Herrick uses various words and symbols throughout his work.

Press, John, *Robert Herrick,* Longman Group Ltd., 1971.

This short study of Herrick's reputation argues that while Herrick is perhaps not one of the language's major poets, his verse still "speaks for the normal sensual man."

Scott, George Walton, *Robert Herrick,* Sidgwick & Jackson, 1974.

This is a short biography of

based on what little is known about his personal life. It also features extended analyses of Herrick's work in a very readable style.

Summers, Claude J., and Ted-Larry Pebworth, eds., *The English Civil Wars in the Literary Imagination,* University of Missouri Press, 1999.

This collection of essays explores the ways in which different poets responded to the Puritan Revolution

in their work. Though "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" is not specifically addressed, there is an essay on *Hesperides,* Herrick's collection of poems, as well as essays on Herrick's contemporaries.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

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