Variations on Nothing Study Guide

Variations on Nothing by Giuseppe Ungaretti

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Contents

Introduction

Giuseppe Ungaretti's poem "Variations on Nothing" first appeared in his 1950 collection *La terra promessa* (The Promised Land), published in Italy. Some early critics felt the collection marked a different style from Ungaretti's typical truncated images and brief lines, yet today the collection is heralded as one of his best works. Even if the poems in this collection take up a little more space on the page than Ungaretti's early poems, they are undeniably still sparse, compelling, and highly imagistic.

In "Variations on Nothing," as in many of Ungaretti's works, the poet concentrates on a single, simple idea and fleshes it out with powerful, descriptive words. The subject in this poem is the fleeting time of human life and the endurance of nonhuman earthly objects. An hourglass may depend on a person's hand to turn it over in order to repeat its measurement of time, but when the hand is gone, the object continues to measure the passing of time. While the overall message is philosophical and obviously abstract, the poet conveys this message with precise images of tangible objects and real-life moments that are both striking and accessible.

Above all else, the poem depends on its ability to evoke specific pictures in the mind and then to translate those pictures into stimulating, provocative contemplation for the reader. Ungaretti's work is known for its obscurity and symbolism, as opposed to logical, concrete expression, and "Variations on Nothing" is an apt example of his subjective style. It should be read as much for the beauty of its expression as for any specific meaning in its lines.

Author Biography

Giuseppe Ungaretti was born February 10, 1888, in Alexandria, Egypt. His parents were Italian immigrants who moved to Egypt when his father accepted a job as a laborer on the construction of the Suez Canal. When Ungaretti was two years old, his father died, and his mother supported the family with earnings from a job at a bakery in an Italian section of Alexandria. Ungaretti attended schools in Egypt until 1912, when he left for Paris to study at the Sorbonne. During his university years, Ungaretti became acquainted with various artists and poets, including Pablo Picasso and Guillaume Apollinaire, and his own poems were first published in 1915 in a French journal.

At the beginning of World War I, Ungaretti was sent to fight in Carso in northern Italy, the scene of some of the war's bloodiest battles. His horrific experiences there became the subject of much of his early poetry, and he later admitted that the brief, sparse style of writing he developed was inspired by the fact that life was minute-to-minute in the trenches. Every soldier had to live as though his next breath was his last. His writing career was established in 1916 with the publication of *Il porto sepolto* (The Buried Harbor). This work, based on his experiences as a soldier, introduced him as a young, new force in twentieth-century poetry and marked the beginning of a great revival in Italian literature.

After the war Ungaretti married Jeanne Dupoix in 1919. Two years later they moved to Rome, where Ungaretti worked with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the 1930s Ungaretti held a special correspondent position with the *Gazzetta del popolo* newspaper and traveled extensively throughout Europe. His first teaching position arose from a 1936 trip to Brazil, during which time the University of Sao Paulo offered him the chair of the Italian language and literature department. His six years in Brazil were professionally successful, but his personal life turned tragic when his nine-year-old son died after complications from appendicitis. Ungaretti and his wife and daughter returned to Italy in 1942.

In Rome, Ungaretti was elected to the Italian Academy and became chair of the modern Italian literature department at the University of Rome, where he remained for the rest of his teaching career. Through the decades, Ungaretti produced more than a dozen volumes of poetry and became one of Europe's most renowned poets. One important collection, *La terra promessa* (The Promised Land), was published in 1950 and includes the poem "Variations on Nothing." In 1967 Ungaretti was awarded the Etna-Taormina International Prize for his book *Visioni di William Blake* (Visions of William Blake), and in 1969 he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature. Ungaretti died June 1, 1970, in Milan, Italy, at the age of eighty-two.

Plot Summary

Line 1

The title of Ungaretti's poem "Variations on Nothing" is as much a part of the poem summary as any of its twelve lines. There is a resounding sense of negativity that recurs throughout the brief but poignant work, and the premise of "nothing[ness]" and "negligib[ility]" makes for an unsettling poetic environment overall. In the first line, it is a "bit of sand" that is "negligible"□a word meaning something so small and insignificant that it can be disregarded and forgotten. While the irony of the word is not evident in this first mention of it, later its important paradox will be revealed.

Line 2

Line 2 explains that the sand is in an "hourglass" and that it slides "Without a sound and settles" at the bottom of the container. The description of the granules silently falling into place serves to emphasize their negligibility. It is like any natural phenomenon conforming to the natural laws of physics, without any say-so or any ado□in this case, the sand simply responds to the laws of gravity.

Line 3

Line 3 seems to come out of nowhere because the beginning "And" implies a direct connection between what has just been said and what is about to be said, but the new image is completely different. The grainy sand dropping through an hourglass now seems to flow into "the fleeting impressions on the fleshy-pink." This line introduces another "variation" on what the title of the poem refers to as "nothing." The initial conjunction "and" refers only to the connections between examples of the overall variety of nothingness, not to an explicit similarity of images.

Line 4

This line qualifies the fleshy-pink as "perishable." Once again, the sense of negativity pervades a word like *perishable*, which acts as a counterpart to the previous "negligible." Line 4 also reveals that the description is "of a cloud," perhaps one typically seen in the sky at sunrise or sunset, when the sun's dim light results in pinkish streaks of "fleeting impressions" across the horizon.

Line 5

Like line 3, this line appears to be a continuation of the previous one because of the opening word, "Then." Also like line 3, a completely different image is introduced

compared to the previous image. This time the image is of a human "hand that turns over the hourglass." There is still a very important direct connection between the images in lines 4 and 5: the reference to human flesh. The descriptor "fleshy-pink" refers to both a cloud and someone's hand, specifically the one that upends the hourglass and sets the sand in motion again.

Line 6

This line, more than any other in the poem, is less imagistic and more rhythm and rhyme for its own sake. It directly connects with line 5, but takes on a flavorful, fluffy lilt with the rhyming words "going" and "flowing" stretched into "going back" and "flowing back," both referring to the movement of the sand. In keeping with the poem's title, lines 5 and 6 supply yet another variation on the main topic.

Lines 7—8

Line 7 includes the second mention of a cloud, but here the visible mass in the sky experiences a "quiet silvering," as a cloud often appears to do in "the first few lead-gray seconds of dawn." The cloud has gone from a pinkish color to the more somber shades of silver and gray, implying on one level the rotational changes that take place in natural phenomena everyday, but suggesting something deeper on another level. Human life has already been introduced in line 5 with the mention of the "hand," and the hand has already been linked to the color of the cloud□at that point, "fleshy-pink." On the heels of this connection comes the "lead-gray" color, linked directly to the cloud again, but also indirectly to the hand. When one describes humans in terms of silver or gray, the obvious image is of an older or aging person.

Line 9

Line 9 and line 5 share similarities along with significant differences. In line 9 yet another dim image is used in conjunction with the human hand, here a "shadow." The first time the hand is mentioned, in line 5, there is no specific environment designated with it. Also in line 5 the time is in present tense□that is, the hand *turns* over the hourglass. In line 9 the hand *turned* over the hourglass. As with the idea of someone turning silver or gray, the sudden switch to past tense suggests a passage of time, or more specifically a passage of life itself.

Lines 10—11

Line 10 is nearly a repetition of line 1, though the addition of "And" at the beginning indicates a continuation rather than the start of anything. It is important to note that the "bit of sand" is still "negligible," so it appears that its *worth* has not improved in the time that has passed. In line 11 the opening phrase "And is silent" compares directly to the opening phrase in line 2, "Without a sound." But the remainder of line 11 is the strongest

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suggestion so far that time has passed and human life has ended. The environment that surrounds the hourglass is so deathly quiet that even the "silent" flowing of the sand through it "is the only thing now heard." Suddenly, the tiny granule of nonhuman matter does not seem so "negligible."

Line 12

"Variations on Nothing" ends with a clear□and somewhat foreboding□proclamation about the difference between humanity and the earth on which it exists. In essence, the nonhuman world will endure long after human life has "vanish[ed] in the dark." Here, the sand sliding through the hourglass keeps ticking away the seconds though the hand that turned it is no longer around. More importantly, the sand now has a voice in the world, and "being heard," does not go the way of its fleshy counterpart.

Themes

Endurance of the Inanimate over the Human

The single dominant theme in "Variations on Nothing" is the endurance of inanimate things over human life. The title itself seems to mock humans in touting the variety of nothingness that exists in the world□an existence that outlasts even earth's highest forms. To make the point clear, Ungaretti offers five distinct examples to support the poem's central idea, and the concrete images serve to make the main point easier to visualize.

The first stanza comprises two variations, and the first two lines make up variation 1. These lines describe nothing more than sand sliding down an hourglass and settling at the bottom without making a sound. Any significance this image may hold is downplayed in the beginning, but it is only the first of several seemingly "negligible" incidents in the much larger scheme of life. Lines 3 and 4 introduce variation 2, this time the "perishable" pink color of clouds. Obviously, clouds are constantly moving, constantly changing shape, size, and often color, so it is a perfect example of what humans may consider "nothing" as far as significance and longevity are concerned. The first stanza then supports the poem title's suggestion that these are merely reflections of things that do not have much, if any, importance in human life.

Variation 3 appears in lines 5 and 6 with the introduction of the isolated, nondescript human hand, the purpose of which seems to be only to turn over the hourglass when it is time to do so. Lines 7 and 8 comprise variation 4, which is another reference to a cloud, this time one that turns silver and gray throughout the first moments of dawn. Finally, the third stanza, lines 9 through 12, provides the fifth variation on "nothing" with another reference to the hand turning the hourglass and the sand sliding silently through it. But this time the image is represented in past tense. Note, though, that only the action of the hand is now described as past. In line 5 it "turns" and in line 9 it "turned," but the "negligible bit of sand" still "slides" very much in the present. It endures beyond the human life that touched it and continues to tick away time, even when no one is there to notice.

Irony and the Significance of "Nothing"

A direct offshoot of the central theme is the idea of the ultimate irony in discovering just how significant "nothing" really is. From the title of the poem through each of its little vignettes of variations, the point seems to be that these images depict trivial aspects of life on earth. The sand in the hourglass is bluntly called "negligible," and the human hand that resets the timepiece seems to do so merely as a rote function. The hand is just a hand□no body or face or mind is connected to render it a *real* or more complete person. And the clouds too are just everyday objects that come and go across the sky, changing shape and color with hardly anyone noticing their existence. Ungaretti's

selection of such apparently immaterial things and events helps set the stage for a surprising turnabout in the end.

The theme of nonhuman endurance would not be so striking if the entities mentioned held a little more obvious significance in the human mind. That is, if the various images in the poem portrayed things like mountains and oceans or even cockroaches and birds, one would not think it far-fetched to picture these things existing before or after human life. Yes, they may be nonhuman but few people would consider them trifling or negligible objects. A grain of sand, however, and the hourglass that holds it, as well as ever-changing vapor mists in the sky merit little attention in the average human's life. Ungaretti's intent, then, is to call very specific attention to them. In doing so, he ironically highlights the profound significance of what is generally considered unimportant.

Not until the final line of "Variations on Nothing" does the central point become clear. The images described in the two- and four-line vignettes have only *appeared* insignificant; in reality, they are anything but. After all, the negligible sand is still around performing its job long after the human being has turned gray, died, and "vanish[ed] in the dark."

Style

Hermeticism is generally defined as intentional obscurity in modern poetry, meaning that the poet chooses private or esoteric symbols to represent a subject, rather than logical or direct expression of it. Hermetic poetry grew out of the French symbolist movement of the late nineteenth century, the most noted members of which included Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud. Symbolists expressed the immediate sensations of human experience through subtle, suggestive, and highly metaphorical language, in the form of symbols. This style was a revolt against the realistic and naturalistic poetry of the time and was based on a belief that reality was internal and could only be *suggested*, not overtly described and labeled.

Hermeticism takes symbolism further, with deeper obscurity of meaning, a belief in the magical quality of single words, and the use of more truncated lines and images. Something that is "hermetically" sealed allows nothing to enter or escape, not even air, and members of this movement sought to keep their poems airtight as well. Ungaretti and fellow Italian poets Eugenio Montale and Salvatore Quasimodo are considered the foremost proponents of hermeticism, which both flourished and faded in the first half of the twentieth-century.

Examples of hermeticism in "Variations on Nothing" include the brief but highly visual images that make up the entire poem. Sand in an hourglass is followed by the "fleeting impressions" on a pink cloud, followed in succession by a hand turning the hourglass, the pink cloud turning to silver, the human hand now in shadows, and finally the sand again sliding down the hourglass. The only complete sentence makes up the final stanza, but the first two stanzas are comprised of phrases, intentionally incomplete to retain a bit of obscurity. The enigmatic quality of the poem is enhanced by the use of seemingly incongruent images□sand, clouds, a hand, darkness□and their presentation one after the other with no real *connecting* language. Some English translations of the poem include ellipses at the end of the first and second stanzas as though to emphasize the fact that something is missing here.

What is generally missing in Ungaretti's poetry, or that of any of the hermetic poets, is a full explanation of just what the point is□what the real subject may be or the overall message that the reader is supposed to extract from it. "Variations on Nothing" is not an easy poem to understand. Ten people may read it and come up with ten different interpretations, each bringing to it an individual perspective based on his or her life experiences. And that is the goal of hermetic poetry. Rich in esoteric symbols and graphic images, the work defies logic and explanation. Its message is to be personally *experienced*, not logically explained.

Historical Context

Ungaretti is known to have claimed four nations as "home"□Egypt, the place of his birth; France, where he was schooled; Brazil, where he spent six years in his first teaching position; and Italy, his ancestral home and the country in which he spent the majority of his life. By far the greatest cultural, historical, and social influences on the poet at the time he was writing material for *The Promised Land* were World War II and the reconstruction period that followed.

As a younger man, Ungaretti had supported Mussolini and Italian fascism because he believed the movement would bring about better conditions and rights for exploited workers and help to stabilize a chaotic post—World War I Italy. When it became clear that Mussolini's real plans were based on racism and tyranny, Ungaretti denounced fascism and admitted that his previous attraction to it had stemmed from an idealistic view that the system would result in equality and prosperity for all Italians. Eventually the fascist leader fell out of favor with the majority of Italians, and in 1943 a rebellion culminated in his overthrow and the dissolution of the fascist party in Italy. Mussolini was imprisoned and Italy surrendered unconditionally to the Allies, but the Germans quickly took control of northern sections of the country. Aided by the Germans, Mussolini escaped from prison, only to be captured by angry Italian partisans two years later. In April 1945 he was executed, and in September the same year, Germany surrendered.

After the war, millions of Europeans faced poverty, unemployment, and starvation. Much of the continent was in rubble, and the social and political climate of most nations was also in ruins. The Soviet Union controlled Europe's eastern half, and strong communist parties in France, Italy, and elsewhere were considered a threat to Western democratic influences there. Great Britain□still reeling from heavy bombing in its cities and with its resources nearly exhausted□announced that it could no longer afford to protect Greece and Turkey from a communist takeover. The United States stepped in with the Truman Doctrine to support nations in southeastern Europe, but the larger concern was how to protect the western half from falling to the Soviet Union. Although the Cold War, which began nearly as soon as World War II ended, was primarily a struggle between the Americans and the Soviets, most nations on the European continent were affected by the actions of the two superpowers.

By 1947, membership in Italy's communist party had grown to 2 million and was a major contender against the country's two other dominant political parties, the socialists and the Christian democrats. In an attempt to squelch the Soviet influence, the American CIA launched a propaganda campaign to "inform" undecided Italians that communism was against Christianity. The move worked, and communism was firmly rejected by the majority of the heavily Catholic country. Italy's ties to the West were solidified in 1949 when it joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In 1958 it became a member of the newly formed European Economic Community (now the European Union). But the greatest changes in Italy and in all of Europe came about after the war by way of the Marshall Plan, formally known as the European Recovery Program.

U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall's proposed aid package to Europe, including interested nations in the East and West, poured an unprecedented $13.3 billion into sixteen European economies over $100 billion in today's currency. The money helped reconstruct power stations; build dams and hydroelectric plants; upgrade manufacturing, mining, transportation, and communications industries; and replace buildings destroyed by bombs and fires. Prior to the war, Italy's economy was largely based on agriculture, with principal products including fruits, corn, soybeans, olives, olive oil, and wine. After 1950, however, the nation's industry developed so rapidly that today it accounts for more than one-third of the annual gross domestic product, and agriculture brings in less than 5 percent. In particular, automobile manufacturing spurred the industrial boon, when Italy's Fiat Motor Company received new assembly lines from Detroit and Pittsburgh.

Some recent historians came to view the Marshall Plan as having a greater psychological impact on the war-torn countries of Europe than an economical one. The claim is based on data showing that economic recovery was well underway before the European Recovery Program began, especially in hard-hit Germany. While the money, food, technology, and manpower that reached the continent from the United States by mid-1948 undoubtedly brought crucial and tangible aid where it was sorely needed, just as vital was what it meant to Europeans' attitudes toward America. A sense of security and community grew in many citizens, as well as a spirit of revival and hope. This notion does not imply that the Marshall Plan placed rose-colored glasses on Europeans when they looked at Americans, for that would be far from the truth. The generous aid, however, did help to create at least small ties where there had been none and to strengthen those that had weakened over the years.

Critical Overview

Ungaretti's poetry has been critically acclaimed as a turning point in twentieth-century Italian literature. He and his fellow hermetic poets dared to break away from the traditional European style of long lines, embellished imagery, and certain themes to embrace a more personal, constricted form of writing. As a result, readers were both challenged and pleased by the unusual brevity and intriguing mystery of their work.

Even among the hermetic group, Ungaretti is often lauded as most true to form. In his introduction to the poet's 1958 collection *Life of a Man*, critic Allen Mandelbaum claims that "no Italian poet since Leopardi has held so fast as Ungaretti has to the dignity of the word, its specific gravity, musical and emotional." And in the introduction to the 2002 collection, *Selected Poems*, critic Andrew Frisardi says about Ungaretti's early collection, *Joy of Shipwrecks*, that the "poetry was as new, strange, and, for many Italian readers, exciting as Eliot's 'Prufrock' or Pound's *Mauberley* were to American and English readers of that period." Frisardi goes on to say specifically about *The Promised Land*, "For me, the poems [in this collection] are like exquisite alpine flora atop an ascetic crag," and he describes "Variations on Nothing" as one of the book's "very beautiful rarefactions."

Although contemporary poetry ushered in yet a newer style of verse with its anything-goes form and subject matter□essentially turning the personal and obscure into the confessional and fully exposed□the hermetic poets were never doubted for their place in poetic history. Ungaretti and his group are as much respected by contemporary scholars and critics as they were during their own time.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill examines Ungaretti's intriguing imagery and his use of sand as a symbol of constant change and, in the poet's words, of "loneliness and nothingness."

Records of humankind's first attempts to communicate with one another do not exist, but it is safe to assume that among the words, gestures, or grunts of the earliest languages there was something that meant "nothing." The same is true for every language spoken in the world today, but perhaps few other words are used so commonly and understood so rarely. When a caller asks "What are you doing?" how often is the reply, "Nothing"? When one spouse asks the other, "What are you thinking about?" the common response is, "Nothing." And when a parent asks a child, "What did you learn in school today?"□that's right: nothing. Yet in each of these examples, the response cannot be true. Human beings are always doing, thinking, and learning something, but it is *easier* to pretend otherwise and the word "nothing" is a handy stop sign in conversation traffic. Some people, however, have taken time to look closely at "nothing" and to appreciate the real significance of the seemingly insignificant. Ungaretti is one of those people, and his poem "Variations on Nothing" is a very striking result.

Fortunately for his scholars and fans, Ungaretti left at least one insightful personal essay that helps explain his motives in writing about nothing. Included in the 2002 collection *Selected Poems*, with an introduction by Andrew Frisardi, "Ungaretti on Ungaretti" is part biography, part philosophical musing, and part explication of hermetic poetry. One of his earliest, briefest, and most intriguing poems, "Eternal," consists of two lines: "Between one flower plucked and the other given / the inexpressible nothing." In the essay, Ungaretti says this about the final word in the poem: "It's an obsession that returns often, as the reader will see, in my song. My first impression of consciousness of the very being that I am appears in the meaning of that next-to-nothing." *Nothing*, it turns out, relates to his growing up in the desert city of Alexandria, Egypt, a place "where life leaves no trace of permanence in time" because "[t]ime always carries it away, at all times."

This vague, curious description of a childhood home is addressed again later in the essay when Ungaretti reveals its source: sand and sea. "The wavering landscape," he says, was "the desert, and then the sea, the sea that as a boy I discovered like a derivation of the desert, the sea that was loneliness and nothingness like the desert, that unstable landscape, changeable from moment to moment." The words "wavering," "unstable," and "changeable" all mean the same thing, and they emphasize the importance of "variations." Nothing seems to remain the same in Ungaretti's world□sand and sea constantly shift, constantly move to and fro, including the sand in an hourglass that continues to sift through its narrow passage each time it is turned over. This image is central to the series of visual snippets that make up "Variations on Nothing," and the idea of *change* helps explain why the all-important "bit of sand" is described as "negligible," even though that description is hardly accurate.

From its first line to its last, the poem flows. Note the lengthy list of *movement* words that appear in just the first eight lines: slides, settles, fleeting, perishable, turns, going, flowing, silvering. And the first image—the sand sliding through the hourglass—is also the final image, suggesting a circularity with no actual beginning or end, only a continuous turning round and round. The same endless movement is implied in the "going back for flowing back, of sand" and in the changing colors of clouds that come and go in the constant circle of time, from dawn to dusk to dawn again. In the end, only the human hand has disappeared but its absence has no effect on the perpetual shifting of sand that remains. Yet, if sand symbolizes constant change, why does it also represent the "loneliness and nothingness" that Ungaretti recalls from his childhood in the Egyptian desert?

Perhaps the relationship is not so farfetched. Anything in a ceaseless state of flux is difficult to grasp, much less to feel close to. One may see an interesting pattern created in the sand along a shore, but there is no use dwelling on it for it will soon be washed away. The same may be said for beautiful but ephemeral shapes of dunes that landscape the desert—admire them quickly, for they will momentarily blow away. Things that escape one's sight and memory so quickly soon become insignificant and unimportant, even to the point of seeming like *nothing*. Ungaretti says that "in saying *nothing*, I was thinking especially, in fact, of that intense activity of annihilation that time gives rise to" in Alexandria. *Annihilation* is an extremely strong word here, implying a total destruction of even the idea of continuation or permanence. It is as though time itself is a stranger to the environment, existing only as a chaotic shifting of present moments, oblivious to a past or a future. Ungaretti goes on to say that, in regard to "nothing," he was "thinking of the mirage that nothingness and abolished time bring about in flashes in the poet's imagination," thereby making the connection between his personal experience and the development of hermetic poetry that became his signature style.

Ungaretti's poem "Eternal," noted earlier in this essay, was written long before "Variations on Nothing," but in both poems the subject is, indeed, nothing. In the former, Ungaretti resigns himself to the "inexpressible nothing," while in the latter, he provides visual snippets of the diversity of nothing, trying to give the reader brief glimpses of what nothing may look like. Most prominent, of course, is sand. And how interesting to learn the poet's thoughts on his early experiences in the desert and to see how that entity continued to hold such significance for him, whether in the form of a vast expanse of seemingly endless sand or only a tiny amount of granules sliding back and forth in an hourglass. Both are constantly moving. Both are so "negligible" that they become vital—a supreme and provocative irony.

Ungaretti's hermetic style is undoubtedly the finest manner of presentation for his message. In his own words, with his poetry he was "attempting to represent what was around me in that environment, what in my feeling was reflected there in that moment, and to express variations of feeling in the most laconic way possible." Laconic—concise or with very few words—certainly describes "Variations on Nothing." From sand to clouds to a human hand, Ungaretti flashes images across the page that at first glance appear disconnected or meaningless but, with closer attention, meld into one another to

become whole. Ungaretti's determination to say as much as possible with as few words as possible results in the vivid, crisp images that make up the poem. If the reader is able to *feel* the message without the poet having to spell it out, the poet's ultimate goal has been met. Note, though, that hermetic poets are not interested in the reader being able to *explicitly* understand the message or to dissect it into manageable parts until some proclaimed meaning has been laid bare. Quite to the contrary. Ungaretti and his group are content to have readers get close but not *too* close.

In this poem, sand is the symbol of constant change, and change becomes nothingness when its continuous cycle turns to monotony or dull confusion. But Ungaretti claims feelings of loneliness as well, and that element within the work is worth considering too. The hushed, isolated images of the hourglass and the clouds alone evoke solitude, but the human hand is by far the most explicit representation of estrangement. The fact that something human is of no more importance than inanimate objects and natural phenomena speaks to Ungaretti's often nihilistic feelings on humankind. He takes it even a step further by having the nonhuman entities in the poem outlast the human as though the human nothingness is of less variety than the sand and cloud nothingness. It is difficult to imagine a sadder, lonelier existence than that of one who goes through life quietly performing a single insignificant duty, then dying and fading away without anyone else noticing. Yet this seems to be the unfortunate fate of the "hand" in the poem.

Despite its rather bleak message, "Variations on Nothing" is a beautifully crafted and enticing work. Sometimes obscure or hermetic poetry can be frustrating or even boring if the language is so confusing and the images so esoteric that the reader would rather give up than try to figure it out. Ungaretti's ability to remain true to the tenets of hermeticism and at the same time present his work in ways that intrigue the reader is what made him one of the greatest poets of his time□and likely what retained for him that title into the 2000s.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Variations on Nothing," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Adaptations

Recorded interviews or readings featuring Ungaretti are rare, particularly in English. However, one may contact the Anthology Film Archives of New York to inquire about an English translation of filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini's recorded interviews with several Italian artists, including Ungaretti, during 1963 and 1964. Pasolini made waves in Italy's culture at the time by questioning his subjects about controversial topics such as sexuality, prostitution, marriage, divorce, and women's rights.

Topics for Further Study

Research another hermetic poet and choose one of his poems to compare to Ungaretti's. How does the other poet's work give evidence of hermeticism? How is the style similar to or different from "Variations on Nothing"?

Write a hermetic poem about "nothing." Consider the images you use to convey it and write a short essay on how difficult or easy it is to present the images in brief, vivid descriptions.

Research the brief period of hermetic poetry and write an essay on why it faded and what replaced it in mid-twentieth-century European literature.

Does "Variations on Nothing" express a positive or negative attitude toward human life? Defend your answer with examples from the poem.

Research how World War II affected life in Italy and write a brief essay detailing your findings. In what ways do you feel "Variations on Nothing" may have been influenced by Ungaretti's wartime experiences?

Compare and Contrast

Late 1940s: Italy's economy is largely based on agriculture, with principal products including fruits, corn, soybeans, olives, olive oil, and wine.

Today: Industrial output, including automobile manufacturing, accounts for more than one-third of Italy's annual gross domestic product, and agriculture brings in less than 5 percent.

Late 1940s: The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is founded and Italy becomes one of the first nations to join, firmly aligning itself with the West after the fall of fascist leader Mussolini.

Today: NATO's strength is weakened as some European nations favor the creation of a military headquarters operated by the European Union (EU), outside NATO supervision and control. This possibility has increased tension between the United States□the NATO superpower□and the EU.

Late 1940s: Secretary of State George C. Marshall announces the "Marshall Plan," an assistance package to aid European economic recovery after World War II. The plan channels over $13 billion to Europe and is successful in stimulating quick growth in the war-torn countries.

Today: Secretary of State Colin Powell and U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan urge delegates from sixty countries at a conference in Spain to donate generously to the rebuilding of Iraq after the United States and a coalition of forces topple the Saddam Hussein regime.

What Do I Read Next?

Ungaretti is often compared to Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi. *Giacomo Leopardi: Poems Translated* (1988) provides an intriguing look at the work of a man who was considered the greatest poet since Dante. His haunting poetry was inspired by his short, painful life as a lonely, frustrated, and sickly hunchback who died at age thirty-nine without ever fulfilling some of his most cherished dreams.

The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry (1997), edited by Jon Silkin, features the works of poet-soldiers from around the world, including Ungaretti, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Isaac Rosenberg. In the introduction, Silkin discusses the changing moods of the poets, from patriotism to anger, compassion, and genuine social consciousness.

Ungaretti's participation in World War I weighed heavily on the subjects and themes of his early poetry and his development of hermeticism. While countless books have been written on the "Great War," a recent account has raised eyebrows and stirred a variety of opinions with its controversial spin on the conflict. In *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (2000), author Niall Ferguson challenges the most accepted assumptions about the war's causes and events. Ferguson blames England for the entire affair, claiming the nation's leaders misunderstood and mishandled German intent.

Further Study

Cary, Joseph, *Three Modern Italian Poets: Saba, Ungaretti, Montale*, University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Cary's first edition of this book was published in 1969, and this later edition offers both the original preface and an updated one regarding three of Italy's most prominent poets of the modern era. He devotes a lengthy section to each poet's poetic philosophy, style, and dominant themes.

Jones, Frederic J., *Giuseppe Ungaretti: Poet and Critic*, Edinburgh University Press, 1977.

While this in-depth look at both Ungaretti's poetry and his work as a critical essayist includes selected poems in Italian, it is mainly written in English and is accessible to the non-scholar.

Katz, Robert, *The Battle for Rome: The Germans, the Allies, the Partisans, and the Pope, September 1943—June 1944*, Simon & Schuster, 2003.

A critically lauded, well-researched history that details the Nazi occupation of Rome from the collapse of Mussolini's regime in September 1943 to the Allied liberation of the city nine months later. This book provides good insight into the state of Italy during World War II and the fierce battles that occurred between the Germans and the Allies as they competed to "win" Italy's capital city.

Lang, Ariella, "The Sounds of Silence: Words of Exile and Liberation in Ungaretti's Desert," in *Revista di Letterature Moderne e Comparate*, Vol. 53, No. 3, July—September 2000, pp. 323—36.

Lang explores Ungaretti's use of language and themes of exile, freedom, and Arab identity in his poetry.

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Frisardi, Andrew, Introduction to *Selected Poems*, by Giuseppe Ungaretti, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002, pp. ix—xxviii.

Mandelbaum, Allen, Introduction to *Life of a Man*, by Giuseppe Ungaretti, New Directions, 1958, pp. xi—xv.

Ungaretti, Giuseppe, *Selected Poems*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002, pp. 241, 249, 251.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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