View Study Guide

View by Marvin Bell

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Introduction

Marvin Bell's poem View, from his 2004 collection *Rampant*, is a work that addresses the anxieties of the contemporary world in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, without ever referring to specific events or political trends. While many contemporary poets have focused on expressing their emotions, Bell has purposely focused on the world outside the individual, using the details of reality to make points that would lack impact if they were simply stated as opinions. With the experience of more than forty years of writing and teaching, Bell has honed his craft to an advanced level of subtlety, allowing him to address the major anxieties of our time with the calm assurance that even the things that seem most overturned are normal.

In View, Bell sets his thoughts in a real-life, everyday situation, describing the common longing that people have to look out at large bodies of water, snatching what glimpses they can from afar or driving to the shore to just sit in a car, look, and wonder. The poem points to a truism that is often overlooked: that the trees that might obscure one's view, the air itself, and even the person doing the looking are all made mostly of water. Bell then compares this unity to the nature of modern warfare, implying that the enemies are no longer, like oceans, large and obvious, as were many of the armies of earlier eras; instead, wars are fought by individuals who move through society undistinguishable from other ordinary citizens, as prevalent as the molecules of water that exist unseen throughout the world.

Author Biography

Ethnicity 1: Jewish

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1937

Marvin Bell was born on August 3, 1937, in New York City, to a Jewish family that had emigrated from the Ukraine, and he grew up in a rural section of Long Island, New York. His childhood in a small town among farms would heavily influence his poetic vision. He attended Alfred University, in western New York, earning a bachelor of arts degree in 1958, the same year as his first, short-lived marriage. He then attended Syracuse University and then earned a master of arts degree from the University of Chicago in 1961. In Chicago, Bell took a class given by John Logan, a poet who inspired him to write poetry seriously and to join an informal group called the Poetry Seminar. He was so inspired by this group that he enrolled in the Writers' Workshop program at the University of Iowa, where he was awarded a master of fine arts degree in 1963. Bell would be associated with the University of Iowa throughout most of his adult life: he was a visiting professor in 1965, an assistant professor from 1965 to 1967, an associate professor from 1967 to 1975, and a full professor thereafter, retiring in 2004 with the position of Flannery O'Connor Professor of Letters. Over the course of his decades at Iowa, he also held several visiting professorships at other universities, including Saint Mary's College of California, the University of Hawaii, Birmingham-Southern College, and Pacific Lutheran University.

Bell is one of the most well-respected and oft-published poets of his generation. He is the author of sixteen books of poetry, the most famous being the two books constituting his □Dead Man□ series: *The Book of the Dead Man* (1995) and *Ardor: The Book of the Dead Man, Volume 2* (1997). He also published a collection of essays and interviews called *Old Snow Melting*, and his work has been included in hundreds of anthologies of literature. From 1975 to 1978 and again from 1990 to 1993, he contributed a regular column to the *American Poetry Review*, called □Homage to the Runner.□ The many honors accorded Bell over the course of his long writing career have included fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature, and senior Fulbright appointments to Yugoslavia and Australia. In 2000, he was appointed the first poet laureate of the state of Iowa, a position that he held for two terms.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-7

Sag Harbor, mentioned in the first line of ⬚View,⬚ is a town at the end of Long Island, New York, not far from where Bell grew up. It has a long history as a seaport, primarily for whaling vessels, with European settlers arriving in the late 1600s. The village is a well-known tourist destination. In the beginning lines of this poem, the speaker presents a character (referred to as ⬚you⬚) who is interested, like many tourists, in a view of the water. The narrator explains that the trees that come between ⬚you⬚ and the harbor are not actually blocking the view, because they are made of water themselves. In fact, both the leaves of the trees and the air are said to be composed mainly of water. Even ⬚the distance, as the bird flies or the squirrel scampers,⬚ is identified as something composed of water.

Lines 8-10

In the eighth line, the poem turns more personal, noting that even the person being addressed is composed of water, specifically, ⬚a kind of flooded hollow hull,⬚ such as that of a capsized boat. This draws a connection between the physical nature of humans and the rest of the physical world. The poem then mentions other places where water can be found. It refers to bays and to ⬚land that was water,⬚ continuing with the conceit that everything, no matter how apparently solid, is made of water; this latter reference may be to bodies of water that have dried up. The wandering human being, meanwhile, is compared to ⬚a log separated from its boom,⬚ where a boom is a barrier of logs chained in place to prevent other logs cut by foresters from floating away. An implication may be that when individuals are disconnected from their community, the community can no longer adequately serve its function, as a disjointed boom might allow other logs to float away.

Lines 11-13

In these lines, Bell drastically shifts focus, conjuring images of people being killed during wartime. The poem mentions death by ⬚shrapnel⬚ as well as by ⬚direct hit,⬚ perhaps to highlight the fact that, despite the inclination to examine the sublime distinctions, any cause of death ends with the same result. The process of dying is presented as an exceptionally long fall, and the process of human decay is presented as ⬚dissolving,⬚ as objects do in water. When the fleshy, or watery, parts of the body dissolve and ⬚become air,⬚ all that is left is the bone structure, which line 13 refers to as a ⬚chart.⬚

Lines 14-18

Line 14, which reintroduces the person whom the poem is addressing, mentions ☐the current war,☐ accusing the addressee of not wanting to see the war and of believing that he indeed cannot. Whether this person does not wish to see the war because he is indifferent or because he would be overwhelmed by the enormity and sorrow of war news is unclear. Likewise, whether the person believes he cannot see the war because it is too far away or because it in no way affects him is also unclear. The narrator then asserts that the poem's addressee is deceived, as ☐the war is in the trees.☐ Given that the narrator earlier equated trees with water and water with everything, the inference here may be that the war, also, is like water, perhaps in its unseen ubiquity. Line 16, ☐The leaves fall, and there it is,☐ likely conjures in the reader's mind an image of the leaves of the trees that otherwise obscure the sight of the water falling; thus, one sees the water; given line 15, the ☐it☐ in question would seem to be ☐the war.☐ Line 17 mentions swaying evergreen trees, which likewise, in moving aside, reveal the water behind. Line 18 refers to the expanse of water☐and perhaps of war☐as an ☐ocean between us☐ that serves to make all others seem especially distant.

Lines 19-23

In coastal locations like Sag Harbor, the humidity-laden air often feels colder than dry air of the same temperature would feel. A breeze intensifies this coldness, making the sting of the air even more bitter, an effect that the poem refers to as shaving one's skin. The narrator points out how the human fascination with water brings onlookers to the shore even when the air is too uncomfortably cold for them to stand outside; thus, they park their cars and stay inside them, separated from the natural world by the car's windshield. One might imagine that a person who has the time to go to the harbor and park for a few minutes, watching the water, has ample time on his hands; yet the narrator remarks, ☐It's a busy day☐ when watching the water is the one thing to be done in the dark before bedtime. This may be a sarcastic statement, or it may be forthright, if the person in question does not have the time to watch the water during the day.

Lines 24-27

The poem next addresses the concept of distance, specifically in the minds of Americans who ☐never travel otherwise,☐ with reference to the effect that looking out at the wide open water has on the human imagination. That is, people imagine that ☐they can see England.☐ Line 27 reads, ☐Their idea of Europe extends beyond their line of sight.☐ Perhaps noteworthy is the fact that the place people imagine they see is another segment of the Western world, with which they conceive of some connection even over the vast ocean.

Lines 28-32

The narrator next returns to discussion regarding the ongoing war. He refers to gossip, which can be considered commonly accepted but insubstantial truth, such as, perhaps, the distinction between solid objects and water, or the concept of distance itself. The enemy has supposedly melted away, acting as water, but the reader may understand that this gossip is in effect untrue; the water, or war, that has melted or even evaporated is still present, only in an altered physical state, such as that of vapor. The eyes in the sky of line 31 would, during an actual war, indicate government surveillance tools, such as satellite cameras; here, they may also indicate the version of reality that is most widely accepted. The fact that these means of observation do not see enemies, only civilians, means that the conflict, between America and the enemy or between existence and dissolution, has not actually ended but has shifted form. Line 32 reads, We want justice, not just a momentary view of justice. Thus, perhaps, people understand that the change in the form of the conflict does not indicate that it has actually ended; in the same way in which they know what is beyond the harbor, they know what justice in a universal sense must be like, and they know that it has not yet been established.

Lines 33-35

In the closing lines, water imagery is reintroduced. A black cloud, which is of course made of water, is mentioned; just as the trees supposedly blocked the sight of the harbor, so the cloud blocks the view of the dawn. The narrator then asserts that only the dew and frost, which are both the condensation of water out of the air, indicate the presence of a new morning. Though frost on the windowpanes indicates an unpleasant coldness, the coming of a new day may be understood as a universal sign of hope.

Themes

Space

In line 6 of ☐View,☐ after Bell's narrator has pointed out that the trees separating the viewer from the sea are actually made of water themselves, he claims that the distance is also made of water. This description leads to a significant philosophical issue: by pointing out that the person and the sea are made of the same water that constitutes the air between them, Bell questions whether the distance exists at all. Things are ordinarily thought to be separated by space, but this poem erases that separation by positing the idea that all physical matter exists continuously. The space between the two objects is not empty but is in fact made of the same substance that the objects are made of; thus the two are connected.

This idea is explored further later in the poem, in line 18. Having described the distance between things as being composed of water, the poem refers to this separation as ☐the ocean between us.☐ This is consistent with the scene that is described, with people lined up along Sag Harbor and looking out to sea. The narrator then notes that this ocean makes people ☐seem☐ far away. The implication here is that they are not really an ocean away; in other words, the space between them is an illusion. The poem completes this train of thought in lines 24-27. Here, the space between Europe and America is negated by the imagination. People looking out across the water, or through the water that composes the air, are able to ☐see☐ across 3,400 miles. In emphasizing the imagination, Bell further negates space, reducing distance not just to water but even to nothing more than a state of mind.

Sense Perception

☐View☐ raises questions about the ways in which people generally perceive the world. The revelation that the trees are mostly made up of water is not a fantasy but a reminder of a simple botanical fact. Similarly, the statement that ☐the distance . . . [is] mainly water☐ is true, if one bears in mind the humidity content of the air that fills that distance. Indeed, one can view the world as a continuum of water, not just in the seas and oceans but on the land and in the skies as well.

Another matter raised in the poem that stands as a matter of perception appears in lines 14-15: ☐You think you can't see the current war and don't want to, but / the war is in the trees.☐ The traditional perception of war has been of a series of battles between two defined armies, taking place at defined places and times. For Americans, since 1865, wars have taken place exclusively in foreign locations and have therefore been experienced only through news reports. Since the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, however, the American perception of war has changed. Citizens have tried to absorb the notion that ☐war☐ can be something that is around

them, as ubiquitous as trees and as systematic in its methods as the process of trees shedding their leaves.

War

The perspective of this poem may be less a reaction to a specific war than a commentary on the way Americans perceive the idea of war in the twenty-first century. The poem's final lines explain the complexity of this idea, as in lieu of enemy soldiers, ☐only civilians☐ can be found; one cannot clearly determine who is to be fought or where danger will come from, because ☐the enemy has / melted away.☐ This statement does not imply that the world has become free from danger; rather, it implies that the modern enemy is scattered and always present, like water.

One of the poem's most powerful statements is found in line 32, with its demand for justice and the distinction that it makes for permanent, not temporary, justice. On one level, this can be read as a response to the United States-led 2003 invasion of Iraq, whereby the conflict was temporary in the sense that it lasted for just two months but was followed by years of hostility between American forces and insurgents. In a larger sense, this line may refer to the temporal nature of all wars, which offer a ☐momentary view of justice☐ because they take place only for a specific duration, even when they do not achieve their stated goals of settling the injustices that began them.

Style

Unified Imagery

Throughout □View,□ Bell uses the image of water symbolically in various ways, each having its own significance while also adding to the poem's overall meaning. Images of actual water include Sag Harbor, the waterways used to transport logs, the dark cloud, and the dew and frost. More obliquely, water is explained as the base constitutional element in the air, in plants, and in human bodies, which dissolve upon death. Since the poem focuses on the interconnectedness of life and the widespread impact of war and terrorism, these variations on the properties of water are appropriate. The water imagery remains a consistent mirror of elements of society throughout the entire poem.

Incidental Enjambment

The term *enjambment* refers to the poetic practice of breaking a line in a place where there is no punctuation or other natural pause between the words in question. The term comes from the French word for □straddling.□ Bell organizes his poem in complete sentences, always ending these sentences at the ends of lines. For example, the end of the first sentence occurs at the end of the third line. A poet who was not employing enjambment might break this sentence more frequently, where natural pauses already exist, such as after □trees,□ □view,□ or □looking.□ Intentional enjambment can help a poet call attention to a word or phrase that would not otherwise be emphasized; that is, the words at the ends of lines are especially noticeable: if they are not followed by punctuation, readers are left to muse about why the poet wanted them to be noticed. The lines of □View,□ on the other hand, extend as far as the right margin, except when punctuated with periods. Thus, the line breaks seem to be merely incidental, as dictated by the limits of space. As such, the poem puts equal stress on each sentence, deemphasizing the visible structure.

Historical Context

The War on Terror

Antipathy toward the United States among Middle Eastern extremists was well known throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Various incidents offered warnings: New York's World Trade Center was targeted by a car bomb that was meant to topple the taller of its twin towers on February 26, 1993. An Algerian man was caught trying to cross the border from Canada with explosives in December 1999, with the plan to destroy the Los Angeles International Airport during the millennial New Year's Eve observance. A boat carrying operatives from the al Qaeda terrorist organization exploded alongside the navy ship USS *Cole* in the harbor of Aden, Yemen, on October 12, 2000. Despite these incidents, Americans paid little attention to the threat posed by terrorism until after the morning of September 11, 2001. That day, members of al Qaeda hijacked four airplanes simultaneously. One was flown into the Pentagon, in Washington, D.C.; two were flown into the towers of the World Trade Center; and one was grounded in a field in Pennsylvania after passengers fought back against the hijackers. The sight of the collapse of the two towers of the World Trade Center, which had ranked among the tallest buildings in the world and had essentially defined the skyline of America's busiest city, immediately made the growing threat of terrorist organizations a priority in the mind of the public. Similar attacks against a nightclub in Bali in 2002, the Madrid subway system in 2004, and the London transit system in 2005 served to remind people that the unseen threat of terrorism exists throughout the world.

Investigations of the September 11 attacks soon showed that al Qaeda had been given support from the Taliban party that then ruled Afghanistan. On October 7, 2001, a small coalition of international forces, led by the United States, initiated air strikes against Afghanistan. Resistance to the coalition was weak but managed to persist, fighting city by city, for almost three years before the country's first democratic election occurred in October 2004. Still, as coalition forces withdrew, terrorist activities in Afghanistan were rumored to again be increasing.

Beyond the direct assault against the country that had harbored the terrorists behind the September 11 attacks, the U.S. government took further steps to establish an ongoing war on terror. One of the most significant domestic events was the passage of the Patriot Act. This bill swept through Congress within a month after September 11, giving broad powers to the executive branch to investigate and detain individuals suspected of terrorist activities who might have been able to elude justice under earlier laws. Civil liberties groups opposed the powers that the Patriot Act allowed the government, but many Americans supported the expansion of federal authority as an acceptable trade-off for security against terrorism.
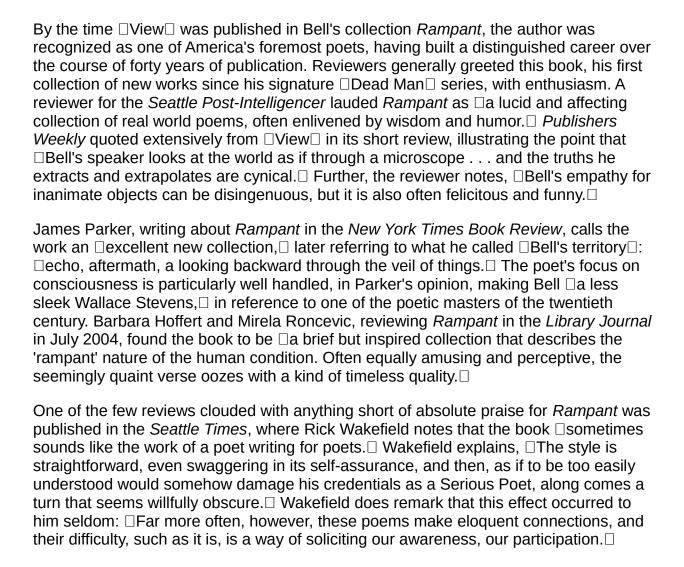
Invasion of Iraq

One tangible aspect of the war on terror was the invasion of Iraq by coalition forces. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. government pursued an atypically aggressive course of military action, expressing a willingness to strike first against countries deemed dangerous, regardless of whether those countries had staged any attacks themselves. In his State of the Union speech in January 2002, President George W. Bush identified three countries￐Iran, Iraq, and North Korea￐as being particularly dangerous, dubbing them the ￐Axis of Evil.￐ In the following months, the U.S. government built a coalition of countries willing to invade Iraq, which had refused to allow weapons inspectors from the United Nations to perform tests to determine whether Saddam Hussein's regime was producing nuclear or chemical weapons.

Evidence was presented to Congress and the American people to demonstrate that an invasion was necessary, though evidence also suggested that Iraq had in fact abandoned its weapons programs more than a decade earlier, as it claimed. A full-scale invasion began on March 19, 2003, and the Iraqi military quickly crumbled. By May 1, the United States declared an end to major combat operations. In the following months and years, the public was made aware that the suspicions that Iraq was building and hiding weapons of mass destruction had been exaggerated, as no such weapons were ever used or found.

Indeed, the end of formal combat operations against Iraq did not mark the end of conflict there. U.S. and coalition forces, which were charged with policing the country once its government had been vanquished, found themselves under constant threat of attack from insurgents, many of whom were presumed to be aligned with al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. During the following years' sustained hostilities, several times more coalition soldiers died from suicide bombings and homemade explosives than died during the two-month-long invasion, and tens of thousands of Iraqi citizens were injured or killed. With the formal Iraqi army disbanded, the U.S. military encountered extreme difficulty in identifying the enemy; as phrased by Bell in ￐View,￐ ￐the eyes in the sky can find only civilians now.￐

Critical Overview

By the time ☐View☐ was published in Bell's collection *Rampant*, the author was recognized as one of America's foremost poets, having built a distinguished career over the course of forty years of publication. Reviewers generally greeted this book, his first collection of new works since his signature ☐Dead Man☐ series, with enthusiasm. A reviewer for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* lauded *Rampant* as ☐a lucid and affecting collection of real world poems, often enlivened by wisdom and humor.☐ *Publishers Weekly* quoted extensively from ☐View☐ in its short review, illustrating the point that ☐Bell's speaker looks at the world as if through a microscope . . . and the truths he extracts and extrapolates are cynical.☐ Further, the reviewer notes, ☐Bell's empathy for inanimate objects can be disingenuous, but it is also often felicitous and funny.☐

James Parker, writing about *Rampant* in the *New York Times Book Review*, calls the work an ☐excellent new collection,☐ later referring to what he called ☐Bell's territory☐: ☐echo, aftermath, a looking backward through the veil of things.☐ The poet's focus on consciousness is particularly well handled, in Parker's opinion, making Bell ☐a less sleek Wallace Stevens,☐ in reference to one of the poetic masters of the twentieth century. Barbara Hoffert and Mirela Roncevic, reviewing *Rampant* in the *Library Journal* in July 2004, found the book to be ☐a brief but inspired collection that describes the 'rampant' nature of the human condition. Often equally amusing and perceptive, the seemingly quaint verse oozes with a kind of timeless quality.☐

One of the few reviews clouded with anything short of absolute praise for *Rampant* was published in the *Seattle Times*, where Rick Wakefield notes that the book ☐sometimes sounds like the work of a poet writing for poets.☐ Wakefield explains, ☐The style is straightforward, even swaggering in its self-assurance, and then, as if to be too easily understood would somehow damage his credentials as a Serious Poet, along comes a turn that seems willfully obscure.☐ Wakefield does remark that this effect occurred to him seldom: ☐Far more often, however, these poems make eloquent connections, and their difficulty, such as it is, is a way of soliciting our awareness, our participation.☐

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, he examines the way that Bell links water and war throughout the poem, only to offer a negation of that connection in the end.

Bell has distinguished himself from other contemporary poets through his focus on a broad view of the human situation, rather than on the events of individual lives. In the poem ⬜View,⬜ for instance, Bell discusses trends, not moments. Such a position is a difficult one for a poem to take, given that individual moments tend to pack more emotional impact, but Bell has always managed to involve readers in social trends by linking them to tangible symbols that reach into their real lives. In the case of ⬜View,⬜ the symbol is water, and the social aspect is the danger posed by terrorism that has come to dominate American political discourse. The poem examines the ubiquitous nature of water, which can indeed be found everywhere, and it talks about war, which in the twenty-first century often means the fight against stealth attacks. Readers might be inclined to link the two, to take from the poem the message that war, like water, is everywhere and must be accepted as a condition of modern life. A more correct interpretation would hold that ⬜View⬜ manages, without overt discussion, to draw the distinction between eternal war and eternal vigilance.

After the high-profile terrorist attacks in New York; Washington, D.C.; and Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, Americans shifted their understanding of what the word *war* means. The traditional meaning of the word implies a defined conflict against defined enemies, which ends when one side is defeated and announces surrender or a truce, signaling to all combatants to lay down their weapons. Beginning with President Lyndon Johnson's announcement of a ⬜War on Poverty⬜ in his 1964 State of the Union address, however, the word began to take on a more general meaning. With the attacks of September 11, the U.S. government reacted in two ways. The first was to engage in conventional military action⬜initially by invading Afghanistan, whose government was considered to have aided the people who had perpetrated the September 11 attacks, and then, later, by invading Iraq, which was identified as having a pro-terrorist, anti-American government. The second was to announce the inception of a ⬜Global War on Terror,⬜ a title that was to change several times over the coming years, with variations including the ⬜Global Struggle against Violent Extremism⬜ and ⬜The Long War.⬜

What any of these new uses of the term *war* failed to provide, as they drifted further and further away from the traditional understanding, was their own clear definition. The enemy was now identified as those who wished law-abiding citizens harm, but that definition only helped identify such people after the fact, once they had proved their malice. Without a defined enemy, how could one know when victory had been achieved? And without knowing what would constitute victory, how could the situation be called a *war*? Twenty-first-century meanings of the word drifted so far from the traditional definition that they hardly seemed related.

These alterations of meaning are implicit in □View.□ Indeed, the definition of the word, according to Bell's usage, is no more clear than it is when □war□ is talked of as an ongoing struggle against an undefined enemy; what is clear is that his use of the word draws it away from being a mere call for perpetual fear. The war referred to in □View□ may be open-ended, but Bell presents it as a natural fact of life, not as a call to arms. He uses the laws of the natural world to illustrate his point: the central conceit of the poem is that water exists just about everywhere in the physical world. Bell offers a range of places and objects that are made of water, from the obvious to the unusual to the barely credible. The different levels cover just about all possible situations.

The first and most compelling idea put forward in □View,□ in its opening lines, is that humans possess an innate urge to look out across bodies of water. Bell names Sag Harbor specifically, but this is clearly just one example to represent all. The urge to look out across expansive seascapes is so strong, according to the poem, that people find themselves straining to catch glimpses of the water through the trees that stand in their way; it is so strong that people will drive to the water's edge at the end of a long hard day just to gaze out and dream.

This observation about human nature would in itself be a solid enough basis for a good, strong poem. Bell adds another level, though, when he brings up, without any preparation, images of death resulting from war, in particular, from □this war.□ Of course, this draws readers' attention; war always does. It is as compelling to the human imagination as open water, drawing the mind beyond itself, out into a larger scale of things. With the introduction of war into the poem, Bell merges nature with human nature and the physical with the psychological, meanwhile retaining an outsider's perspective on everything.

In raising the ideas that compel human imagination, Bell turns to aspects that are not open to full view. Regarding water, he discusses the way it is hidden within physical objects. By the second line, the poem draws attention to the way that the very trees are composed of water, and it goes on to point out other places where intellect tells us that water resides. While common language defines water only as the wet, clear liquid in the bay, the poem reminds us that squirrels, flesh, and leaves are all just variations on the theme of water.

As obvious as these notions are, they are quite discomforting when applied to modern warfare. Bell handles these main ideas in a way that implies that war, like water, can be found in the most unobvious places and is in fact present almost all of the time. This idea would have been remote to Americans before the September 11 attacks; they may have been able to articulate the notion if asked, but its impact would have been theoretical, not deeply felt, just as the notion that solid objects are composed of water is too abstract to hold as an emotional truth.

Even after moving the poem away from the types of immediate emotional experiences that poetry usually relies on, Bell goes one step further: visible, solid objects are made of water, the poem tells us, and water hides from view in the transparent air. This idea about water can be correlated to war, too: it is, in fact, the poem's most controversial

implication. Bell implies not only that war is drawing us to it, or that it is all around us, but also that war is itself the basis of reality, the core element of everything that is and ever will be, observed or not.

If the poem solely delineated the parallels between war and water, then its overall message would be that war could be seen, as water sometimes is, as ylem, which is a term that physicists use to describe a primordial substance from which all matter derives. Plenty of evidence supports this notion. A line about people imagining England, of all places, could be interpreted as a hint at the way the British empire was tricked by their optimism into denying the reality of war until Germany invaded Poland in 1939; a line like □the war is in the trees□ could be read as a warning of the danger that lurks underneath all. In this way, □View□ can be seen as tilting toward the same sort of verbal dissolution as the phrase □war on terror,□ actually losing relevance by trying to account for too many variables at once. If everything is war, then the word *war* means nothing in particular; much more useful would be to say that everything has war *in* it, just as the poem points out that just about everything, noticeably or not, contains water.

At the end of the poem, Bell makes clear that his view of the war is, in fact, limited, not limitless. For one thing, the mention of □morning□ in the last line implies the passage of time, a sense of things coming around again, in contrast to the notion of some eternal reality. Here, water is again recognized as being separate from the observer, appearing as a black cloud and as dew and frost. Bell has presented the enemy's defeat as just □gossip,□ replacing them in the search for enemies with civilians; this could mean that the enemy hides within the hearts of civilians, which is indeed a belief that permeates a society ever on the defense against terrorism. Still, it could also mean that, given a choice, one could define others not as the enemy but as citizens like oneself.

The poem's key phrase, and the one that keeps it from being a justification for a life of constant fear, is its distinction between □justice□ and □a momentary view of justice.□ This statement raises, without further explanation, the notion that an innate sense of justice, not war, permeates our sensibilities in the way that water permeates the physical world. The problem is that this notion is presented as an unsupported assertion: throughout the poem, □war□ is repeatedly touched on and connected with the ubiquitous nature of water, but the idea of justice is not explored, only mentioned. This is the poet's right: it puts the responsibility on the reader to determine independently exactly how justice fits into the grand scheme of things, rather than explaining how. Readers either get the point or they do not. While war has been explored throughout the poem, justice is presented as a grander concept, one far beyond the need for explanation.

□View□ is a risky poem, because it leads readers in one direction for most of its unbroken length only to change the terms of its understanding in the last few lines. In this sense, it fits well with the sensibilities of America after the events that brought terrorism into the public discourse. In a flash, the expectation of violent attack went from being an abstract possibility to a fact of modern life, and this poem acknowledges that. At the same time, it directs readers toward the horizon, raising, though not fully

establishing, the idea that even more universal than the narrow concept of war is the concept of justice.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on □View,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Holmes is a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, he contends that in View, one of Bell's intentions is to subtly awaken the consciences of his readers.

Different poets certainly write for different reasons. Some may write exclusively for themselves, to channel and express their innermost thoughts, with total disregard for the effects borne on any audience, perhaps neglecting even to attempt to publish their work. Others may prize the emotional connection they can develop with their readers, presenting either their own or fictionalized experiences in ways that stir sentiments perhaps previously unknown to those readers. Still other poets may go beyond that bare emotional connection to prod their audience not only to feel but also to think⏤to consider particular concepts and perhaps reflect on the relevance of those concepts to their own lives. Bell may indeed be considered a member of this last group, intentionally taking advantage of the poetic format to allow his readers to learn and understand more than can be learned and understood through functional prose. In fact, given his subtlety, his readers may not even be aware of what they are absorbing.

In an interview with Martin Blackman for *Copper Canyon Press*, Bell remarked, ⏤I confess that, for me, poetry has philosophic import, and I believe it is to be valued, not only for itself, but as a manifestation of deeper things.⏤ He also stated, ⏤A poetic image is not just a thing but a wedding of inner feeling with outer perception.⏤ Thus, the reader might expect his poems to bear meanings more profound than those evoked in the course of first readings. In ⏤View,⏤ the emphasis seems to lie in the comparison drawn between water and war, both of which can be construed as ubiquitous. On a less apparent level, Bell may be highlighting the lack of worldly awareness of the average American.

The primary setting of ⏤View⏤ is Sag Harbor, which is mentioned twice by name; in line 19, Bell may have more simply written ⏤In the harbor,⏤ effectively reestablishing the setting, but he chose to again present the proper name in full. As such, Sag Harbor should probably be considered to represent more than simply any and all harbors. Indeed, Sag Harbor is something of a resort village on Long Island. Those visiting its waters, at least as represented in the poem, might be expected to have a fair amount of leisure time at their disposal and, more generally, to be relatively idle people. The name of the harbor would seem to underscore this point, conjuring images of things, or perhaps people, that are no longer as firm or taut as they used to be. Those staying at the harbor's resorts may be sagging both mentally and physically.

Line 8 depicts the person being addressed by the poem, ⏤you,⏤ as ⏤a kind of flooded hollow hull.⏤ The use of the second person is itself indicative of Bell's intent to fully engage his readers. This line may even be seen as something of an affront. To reduce humans in general to their physical components might be seen as strictly scientific, but the term ⏤hollow hull⏤ connotes a regrettable emptiness. If the hull in question is that of a seed, its being hollow indicates that nothing exists inside it to one day produce growth; the seed will come to naught. If the hull is that of a ship, and it is flooded, it will

certainly sink. Line 10, meanwhile, reads, you bob like a log separated from its boom. A boom is a mass of floating logs used as a barrier. A log set adrift from a boom is purposeless; also, in bobbing, it is simply carried along by the water and can in no way control its course. Thus, aside from establishing humans as largely aqueous, Bell is construing them, the reader included, as empty and purposeless.

Lines 11 through 13 offer a vivid description of bodies that first fall from shrapnel, then dissolve, and then are interred as flesh, leaving behind only a chart of bones. Bell further dehumanizes the human, somewhat unexpectedly, given the pacific nature of the first ten lines, perhaps in an effort to jolt his readers. In line 14, he declares that his reader wishes not to see the current war at all; to a philosophic poet such as Bell, for whom ideas and understanding would be revered, an accusation of willful ignorance must be taken as a serious charge. In line 18, he offers a reason for this ignorance: It is the ocean between us that makes others seem so far away. But especially in the twenty-first century, the world is indeed a small one, and even those that seem far away are neighbors in a global sense; the plights of all should be considered, especially by those who are comfortable. Bell highlights the level of comfort of the denizens of Sag Harbor in noting that they stay in their cars because the slight seacoast breeze at forty degrees can shave your skin. This comment may be sarcastic; in light of the horrors of war and the possibility of death, one perhaps ought to at least briefly cherish, not seek shelter from, a bracing sea breeze. Lines 22 and 23 seem more pointedly sarcastic; if one has only one thing to do in the dark before going home to sleep, especially if at the time residing in the resort town of Sag Harbor, that person is probably not busy.

Lines 24 through 27 make reference to England and Europe, another seeming departure from the content of the poem thus far. The current war, given the poem's 2004 publication, must be the conflict between American troops and insurgents taking place in Iraq. Aside from the recent Balkan conflicts, Europe, perhaps especially England, America's primary national ancestor, is likely seen by Americans as a place of peace. The denizens of Sag Harbor, then, are again construed as somewhat willfully ignorant in seeing, whether with their eyes or their imaginations, only that continent of similar culture and peace; the Middle East, on the contrary, is not a place that comfortable Americans generally try to see. The poem concludes with further references to perspective. The dawn is obscured by a black cloud, which may be taken to represent the war in question or, more broadly, injustice. Given the absence of light, we are only aware that morning has come by virtue of the dew and the frost on the windowpanes. With the image of frost, Bell further portrays Americans as having their view of the world obscured. That frost might be interpreted as the news of death that would come in the morning papers referred to in line 28.

In sum, Bell seems to have taken several opportunities to very subtly question the perspectives of Americans. In fact, the poet effectively focuses on the notion that for most Americans, their view is simply that: only a view. Rather than participating or engaging in debate regarding world events, they are merely watching. In the aforementioned interview, Bell declared that he is affected by his view of the human condition, by the swirl of the arts, and of course by the news. Perhaps, then, he

believes that the average American is not affected by the news, in particular, nearly enough. Regarding the poems found in *Rampant*, he refers to them as □sewn, sometimes tightly,□ with any given poem something like □a single ball of twine you can hold in one hand.□ Indeed, in □View,□ he has quite meticulously woven together several different strands of thought, regarding, water, war, and Sag Harbor, into a powerful coherent unit. That power may not be especially obvious to the casual reader. A last quote from Bell may account for that fact: □I think complexity gets lost in overstatement. The wholeness of poetry only happens inside a reader or listener who leans forward to take part.□ Thus, Bell would not wish to make any sort of overt statement regarding the intent of his poem; he would not admonish the reader to pay more attention to the news and demonstrate more compassion for those living elsewhere in the world. Rather, through a number of statements that at times seem disjointed, he manages to unite those concepts in the minds of his readers, and whether they are aware of the fact or not, they will have developed a more profound understanding of the far-reaching relevance of war.

Source: Michael Allen Holmes, Critical Essay on □View,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Adaptations

Bell was recorded discussing and reading poetry for the *New Letters on the Air* radio program in November 1984. A cassette recording of this performance was released by the University of Missouri Press in 1990.

The speech Bell gave upon becoming the first poet laureate of the state of Iowa is available online at http://www.uiowa.edu/~humiowa/marvinbspeech.htm and includes the text of □White Clover,□ a gentle nature poem that exemplifies the tone of his kinder works.

Topics for Further Study

Create a chart that shows the water content of different objects mentioned in the poem, such as the human body, trees, clouds, and air. Explain the scientific principles that allow the objects on your chart to keep their separate identities without dissolving into puddles.

This poem specifically mentions Sag Harbor as a place where people go when they want to look out at water and imagine the world. Identify a place near where you live where people go to reflect, such as a body of water, a forest, an airfield, or a tall building. Write a poem about what you think an ordinary person might ponder there.

Bell makes a distinction between □justice□ and □a momentary view of justice.□ Using examples from books and the Internet, write an extended definition, several paragraphs in length, that explains the complexity of the abstract concept of justice.

Divide students into two panels to debate opposing perspectives about how much the war in Iraq affects the daily lives of Americans, including students, using examples from your surroundings to illustrate both sides.

Would people from previous eras understand this poem's message that □the war is in the trees?□ Pick a war from America's history, such as the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, or the Vietnam War, and write a letter from the perspective of one of the citizens who lived through it, explaining what she or he would understand about spies and terrorism.

What Do I Read Next?

Of the many poetry collections that Bell has published over the years, the most controversial and widely praised is *The Book of the Dead Man* (1994). The poems in this book, told in a dry, anesthetized voice, examine life's most basic elements. This book and its sequel, *Ardor: The Book of the Dead Man, Volume 2* (1997), are available from Copper Canyon Press.

In the 1980s, Bell and the equally celebrated poet William Stafford corresponded with each other in poetry, each using the poem most recently received as the basis for a responding poem. The result is a book of solid poetry and also an instructive look at the creative process. *Segues: A Correspondence in Poetry* is out of print but easily available through libraries and used-book outlets. It was published in 1983 by David R. Godine Publishers.

Bell's poetry has been likened to that of the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Jorie Graham, with whom he taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. In particular, Graham's poem □Philosopher's Stone□ seems to mirror the skepticism and wonder of □View.□ This poem, as well as Graham's other works in her 2003 collection *Never*, complement Bell's work in capturing the tone of the new millennium.

□View□ relies on readers' understanding of the metaphoric significance of water and of war. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* is a well-respected polemic on the use and significance of metaphors. First published in 1980, a second edition was produced by the University of Chicago Press in 2003.

Another poet associated with the Iowa Writers' Workshop, James Galvin, published his collection *X* in 2003; like *Rampant*, it was recognized by the Lannan Foundation with a Literary Award.

Further Study

Behn, Robin, *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*, Collins, 1992.

Bell is one of the dozens of writing teachers featured in this book, which can be useful in helping readers understand how a poem like □View□ is put together.

Emoto, Masaru, *The Hidden Message of Water*, translated by David A. Thayne, Beyond Words Publishing, 2004.

Emoto is a Japanese philosopher and motivational speaker whose theory of hope, based on the fact that the common element of water transmits emotions and ideas, has become the center of international attention, in part because his photographs of water were featured in the 2004 film *What the Bleep Do We Know!* ?

Feinstein, Sascha, and Yusef Komunyakaa, eds., *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*, Indiana University Press, 1991-1996.

Although the style of □View□ is Bell's alone, he is often grouped with poets from the □jazz poetry□ tradition. This two-volume work explains jazz poetry and includes Bell's poem □The Fifties□ as an example.

Schneier, Bruce, *Beyond Fear: Thinking Sensibly about Security in an Uncertain World*, Springer Press, 2003.

This book looks at American society's insecurity regarding possible attacks, the various threats faced in the modern world, and how fear can be stirred up and manipulated.

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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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