Walk Your Body Down Study Guide

Walk Your Body Down by J. T. Barbarese

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Introduction

J. T. Barbarese's poem, "Walk Your Body Down,," published in 2005 in the award-winning collection *The Black Beach*, presents a few intense moments from the narrator's point of view as he observes an urban scene in some undisclosed city and contemplates the meaning of life. Through this poem, the reader witnesses a variety of emotions, including loneliness, frustration, and anger, as the narrator projects his feelings on and draws conclusions about his fellow city dwellers.

Barbarese's narrator observes life around him and tries to make sense of it all. He observes the sounds and sights around him—the arguing couple, the crying baby, the man walking down the middle of the street—and weaves them together with the feelings and collected experiences of his own life, hoping that this will explain the fragmentation he sees. He sees stressful and maniacal behavior and wants to smooth the ragged edges. He senses death and wants to put a comfortable face on it. He tries to remind his readers to claim the lives that have been offered to them as gifts and to enjoy the present moment, before it is too late.

Author Biography

J. (Joseph) T. Barbarese was born in Philadelphia on May 18, 1948. He attended Franklin and Marshall College, Duke University, and Temple University, where he earned his doctorate. He taught writing at Friends Select School in Philadelphia, as well as at Rutgers University in New Jersey. As of 2007, he had written four books of poetry: *Under the Blue Moon* (1985), *New Science* (1989), *A Very Small World* (2005), and *The Black Beach* (2005), the collection in which “Walk Your Body Down” is found. *Black Beach* won Barbarese the Vassar Miller Prize.

In addition to his poetry, Barbarese also wrote short stories, essays, and literary reviews, which appeared in various magazines, including the *Atlantic, Story Quarterly, Journal of Modern Literature, New York Times*, and *Georgia Review*. Barbarese also translated Euripides’s plays, which appeared in *Euripides 4, Ion, Children of Heracles, The Madness of Heracles, Iphigenia in Tauris, Orestes* (1999). He also wrote an afterword for the revised edition of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Men* (2004).

As of 2007, Barbarese was married and had three children.

Plot Summary

First Stanza, Lines 1–13

Barbarese's poem "Walk You Body Down" begins with a very ordinary phrase. The narrator sits somewhere, possibly waiting for a bus or train, with strangers all around him. The narrator mentions a couple on his left. He is aware of them, eavesdrops on their conversation, but appears not to know them.

The narrator relates that the couple "is breaking up, the baby." If the reader overlooks the punctuation in this line, the image that is created is violent, and the brutality of this image forces the reader to pay attention, which is probably exactly what the poet intended. Looking more closely, the reader sees the comma in the second line and realizes that the couple is breaking up, arguing, but they are not hurting the baby. The tension between them might be flaring, which may make the narrator uncomfortable.

The baby is sitting on a ramp "beside us," the narrator states. The baby is separated from the couple and the narrator, on a ramp, which implies a taking off point of some kind. The baby, "sings maniacally," setting a tone for the scene. The baby is singing as if it has gone mad. The baby might be feeling the emotions conveyed by the couple. The couple's discomfort is affecting the people around them. But while the narrator just sits there and tries to control his own negative reactions to whatever the couple is doing, the baby sings, letting the whole world around it know exactly how it feels to be in the company of the couple whose relationship is ending. If the baby belongs to the couple, then the emotional discomfort becomes more understandable. Although too young to understand the situation, the baby feels the emotional strain of the couple.

By the fifth line of the poem, the narrator observes a man walking down the street, a man who reminds the narrator of himself. This man seems ordinary enough: he is middle-aged and of average build. However, he is doing something extraordinary: he is walking down the center of the street. The narrator immediately jumps to conclusions about the man, and these reactions are more about how the narrator feels about himself than about what he knows of this man. The narrator projects how he feels onto this stranger. The narrator notices little quirks about him. He then projects how he himself would feel if he were doing what this man is doing. For example, the narrator believes the man is "gathered into himself like an Arctic bird." The fact that the narrator conjures up an image of an Artic bird, as opposed to a tropical bird, makes the reader think about the cold. An Artic bird must find some way to keep warm. When a man is cold, he might wrap his arms around himself in an attempt to contain his body heat. This is what the narrator suggests when he states that the man has "gathered into himself," as if to protect himself from the cold. But the cold is not necessarily physical. It could be an emotional cold, the chill of "aloneness." The narrator sees is his own loneliness. Sitting in the middle of a city of many people, the narrator feels alone in the crowd. Perhaps the couple feel it, too, as they face separating. Separation is also conveyed by the image of

the baby, who is sitting on the ramp without anyone taking care of it. So far in the poem, most images have a touch of this loneliness.

In a strange way, the narrator, in line nine, attempts to create something positive from this sense of aloneness, which he states in the phrase “at home here.” This phrase usually conjures a warm feeling. There is a sense of belonging in being at home. However, the home that the narrator is talking about is not warm or friendly but rather one of shared grief or lack of caring. Everyone that the narrator has mentioned is in one way or another ill at ease. Sure, the Artic bird man who is walking down the middle of the street has learned to adapt to the cold, but that does not mean that he is comfortable. He is “aloof as an element,” the narrator states. The man has adjusted to his loneliness by detaching himself from his surroundings. He walks down the middle of the street as if he owns it, unaware of eyes scrutinizing him. After all, the narrator states, “who but he would care.” In other words, although the streets are crowded, everyone is a stranger to everyone else. No one knows anything about the other people who fill the sidewalks, cars, and buses. No one really cares.

But then the narrator contradicts himself. When this man in the street first appears, one of the first things the narrator comments on is that the man looked like him (the narrator). However, by line thirteen, the narrator switches from this position, stating that this man “knows nobody else is like him anywhere.” Not only does this contradict with the narrator’s earlier statement in which he is relating to this stranger, but this concept of being unlike everyone else can be taken in two ways. First, it could be a pessimistic sentiment. People look for similarities in other people, so they can relate to one another. If a person cannot find something comparable in another person, it may be hard to share an experience. If everyone felt this way, then that feeling of breaking up would be everywhere. The world would be made up of separated individuals with nothing in common. In a second, more positive reading, the narrator could be referring to a person who enjoys celebrating his uniqueness, his own special gifts or talents that are different from everyone else’s. It is hard to know which way the narrator intends this comment until the reader continues on to the next few lines of the poem.

Second Stanza, Lines 14–21

In the second stanza, the narrator concentrates on the man in the street. All memories are centered in the body, the narrator points out, and then the body takes on the task of representing oneself to the world. The narrator turns to the man who “stutter-steps down the center line,” so out of synch with what everyone else is doing. The man is practically dancing down the street. Not on the sidewalk, he walks in traffic. All the narrator sees is the man’s pride. The man is acting as if he owns the world, just as he owns his body, which he is walking “proudly into the twilight.” This image suggests impending death. However, this death does not bring with it a connotation of suicide or carelessness. Instead there is a feeling here of performance. The man, at least in the mind of the narrator, is making a statement with his walk. The message to all onlookers, as the narrator interprets it, is to be proud of all those memories that are stored in the body and to walk that body toward the light, past both the beauty of nature (the “budded

arrangement of sun and cloud") and the ugliness of manmade structures (the "caskets of neighborhoods"). The last two lines of this stanza deliver the man's message, which is to care for the self, because that is all one has. Until the last breath ("when the mind leaves the curb in its black cab"), one should stay mindful.

Third Stanza, Lines 22–27

At the beginning of the third stanza, the narrator returns to the earlier image of the arguing couple. The narrator repeats the phrase "break up." This time the breaking up is extended, though, to include conversations. Words, the narrator might be inferring, do not always convey the full meaning behind them. The "conversations break up" because of poor reception, a weak connection, or some other distraction, such as a lack of understanding. This results in people not understanding one another, not empathizing with one another. This situation may be the narrator's reason for emphasizing, in the previous stanza, that "all you remember, care for, is yourself." Conversations are difficult, relationships are challenging, and both are susceptible to falling apart. Babies, who believe they are immortal, go on singing. But even they suffer. They are manic. Babies are on the ramp, where they "go up and down / like physics experiments." They are much more susceptible to the up-and-down emotions of the people around them.

Before the poem ends, the narrator reflects, once again, on the man's message, asking the reader to stay aware of his own body and to engage fully in living in the body. Some people, the narrator might be saying, are empty shells. They have abandoned their bodies, walking around on the earth like lost souls, detached from their own experiences. To emphasize this in the final lines, the narrator reminds the reader: "o, walk your body down, don't let it go it alone."

Themes

Urban Living

The narrator in Barbarese's poem "Walk Your Body Down" sets the scene in the first few lines, making it clear that this is an urban setting. The narrator does so not by talking about groups of people but by insinuating that he is sitting in the midst of strangers, who do not appear happy. The narrator is aware of an argument going on by two people near him; he suspects they are breaking up. The narrator's mention of a ramp, a man walking in the street, and "caskets of neighborhoods," all convey the city setting. The poet seems to be saying that people are in proximity in the city, but that does not mean they relate to one another or feel connected as a group.

Isolation and Loneliness

A sense of isolation and loneliness pervades this poem. First, there is the breaking up of the two people who sit next to the narrator. The baby sitting on a ramp without being attended to also suggests isolation of individuals. A ramp is an in-between place. It is neither where the narrator is sitting nor some place else, but a bridge connecting two different levels. The ramp signifies the place "where the babies go up and down / like physics experiments." In this sense, the narrator may be suggesting the emotional rise and fall that people experience. In the scene, the baby is not moving but is stuck on the ramp, isolated from the adults.

Another image of isolation is that of the man in the street. Everyone else, it can be assumed, is walking on the sidewalks or driving in cars. This man is in the street, making it a stage in a sense, seemingly very much into himself. Although his separation from others does not seem negative, he still is alone.

The phrase "caskets of neighborhoods" also adds to the separation. Caskets are boxes big enough for only one body. They are the ultimate enclosures of separation since they contain the corpse to be buried. Although the word "neighborhoods" implies congregations of many people, when used with the word "caskets," the image of neighborhoods implies not so much a co-mingling of people as a kind of stacking up of individuals, a collection of individuals each packaged in his own cell or box.

Specific phrases in this poem refer to isolation and aloneness, such as "his aloneness at home here" and "alone as earth or air." But the last line in the poem attempts to counteract the theme of loneliness: the narrator suggests, "don't let it [the body] go it alone."

Mortality

The first reference to death in this poem occurs in the second stanza, when the narrator is watching the man walk in the street and describes him as walking “proudly into the twilight.” Twilight may suggest death, as in the twilight of one’s life, marking the end of it. Even the “budded arrangement of sun and cloud” seems to suggest the floral displays that often surround a person’s casket. Reinforcing this allusion is the narrator’s mention, in the next line, of “caskets.” As the second stanza ends, the narrator refers to the “moment when the mind leaves the curb in its black cab.” Here, the word “leaves” also implies death, with the “black cab” reminiscent of a hearse. Then as the third stanza continues with this image, the narrator brings forth the image of not only conversations breaking up but also people. This could be a reference to what it may feel like at the moment of death, when ties to life are slowly broken, as the mind slowly releases all its memories. Then the narrator states that only babies go on singing at this moment; that is because they still believe they are immortal. Adults know better. Adults are well aware of their mortality. They know that one day, they will die.

End of Relationships

There are several different endings of relationships in this poem. The most obvious is the couple who are “breaking up.” This relationship, the narrator suggests, somehow affects the baby who is singing “maniacally,” perhaps sensing that its relationship with the couple, as the baby has known it up to this point, is also breaking up.

There are also references to the end of life. That the “mind leaves the curb” implies an end of relationship between the mind and body. The leave-taking occurs, as the mind faces death. In the last stanza, there are more endings, as “conversations break up, and the people too.” Conversations are no longer being maintained because communications does not occur. People are falling apart too, no longer relating to others or to themselves.

Style

Imagery

Imagery is used in poetry to convey meaning through pictures. Where concrete words alone fall short of providing the meaning the poet wants to convey, images are used so the reader can better envision the subject. For example, the “baby on the ramp” is an image that the poet uses to imply the baby’s isolation. Another image comes in the simile of the man, whom the narrator describes as “gathered into himself like an Artic bird.” This same man is also “aloof as an element,” the narrator states. Here, the poet defines an emotional state with a scientific term. In creating this image, the poet emphasizes the man’s singleness. What could be more separate than an element, a fundamental form of matter? The poet creates a similar image in the phrase “alone as earth or air.”

In the phrase “budded arrangement of sun and cloud,” the poet accomplishes two things. First, there is the image of floral arrangement, such as those given at a funeral. In this interpretation, the poet imbues the image with a sense of death. However, the poet creates another interesting effect. By referring to the sun and cloud as a “budded arrangement,” the poet encourages the reader to look at nature in a new way. Clouds and the sun are so much a part of everyday experience that people might forget to notice them. However, the poet is telling the reader to look again, to see the sky as extraordinary and renew his relationship with nature.

In the third stanza, the poet refers to children, who although they are singing are in pain, “hurled up and down the ramp where the babies go up and down like physics experiments.” The children are, in some ways, like pawns, the poet suggests, at the mercy of the emotions and actions of the adults around them. The poet suggests that the emotional up-and-down ride that children are subjected to is like some kind of physics experiment that measures relationships between objects. This image suggests that children are seen as having no emotions. They are likened to the elements by the adults who handle them. They are hurled from one place to another (that is why they are on the ramps) as the adults fail in their communications. All of this is implied through imagery.

Tone

The tone of the poem reflects the poet’s attitude toward the subject. Tone can also imply mood. Barbarese’s “Walk Your Body Down” expresses many emotions, the frustration of the baby, the depression of the couple, the self-absorbed contentment of the man in the street. However, the narrator’s tone seems didactic, as if the poet has a message that needs to be conveyed to the reader. First, the poet exposes various negative emotions, pointing out the break down in relationships and communications and the pain that it causes the children. Next, the poet offers a reminder: life is too short to waste in on

these feelings. One needs to walk through the congested highways of life, enjoying the moment. One should live fully in one's own body, where all the memories and experiences are stored. Emphasizing this message is the tone of the last sentence in the poem; in the last line, the narrator directly tells the reader to walk in the body. Thus the poem ends by repeating the title's statement.

Enjambment

Enjambment occurs when the subject of one line continues grammatically into the subsequent lines. Enjambment occurs in the second, third, and fourth lines of the first stanza: "the baby / on the ramp beside us / sings maniacally." The line breaks emphasize the isolation of the baby. Too, the enjambment requires the reader to move toward the period without pausing, causing the poem to read more quickly through the syntax of the sentence.

Free Verse

Some formal poetry has a strict rhyme and metrical structure. Lines are measured by the number of beats or syllables, each line containing the same number. However, in free verse, there is no specific structure that dictates line length, rhythm, or rhyme scheme. Therefore the length of the line, that is, the number of beats in each line, can vary.

In free verse, the poet decides to end a line for the poem's sake or for the effect that the poet wants to create for the poem. For example, in the fourth line, the poet has the phrase "sings maniacally" alone on the line. Isolating the phrase like this emphasizes it. A baby singing maniacally is an unusual image. This image emphasizes the weirdness of the scene. The baby sounds strange, unnatural. In the sixth line, the poet isolates the phrase "down the center of the street." The poet emphasizes the man's location by isolating this image on a line. The poet repeats this type of isolation for the phrase, in line twelve, "alone as earth or air," once again emphasizing the man's separate location. Then in the third stanza, in line 24, the poet wants to emphasize the pain of the children. The poet first mentions that the children are singing, which one would assume is a sign of happiness. This is not what the poet intends, though. It is their pain that the poet wants to point out: the phrase "and so is their pain" is given its own line.

Historical Context

Married Couples Breaking Up

In 2005, over 2 million people were married, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. A large number of these marriages, according to statistics, were anticipated to end in divorce. Divorce statistics for 2005 include figures such as those found in the state of Florida, where over 81,000 divorces occurred in comparison to a little over 158,000 marriages. In the state of New York, a little more than 53,000 divorce papers were filed, compared to little more than 135,000 marriage in that same year. The center concluded that for 2005, for every 1000 marriages, about 20 would end in divorce. Although the number of divorces dropped sharply after the 1980s, so did the number of people getting married. Living together without getting married seemed increasingly popular, in which cases people can separate without getting a divorce.

Children are affected by divorce, and their problems can be overlooked by divorcing parents who are coping with by their own challenges. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychology (http://www.aacap.org), children whose parents go through a divorce can have problems sleeping, can become depressed, and can go through withdrawal due to stress and their sense of loss, which can then lead to poor grades in school, lowered self-esteem, and troubles in their own relationships with friends.

Increasing Urban Populations

According to an article by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the United Nations stated that in the early 2000s more than half the world's population lived in urban settings. The trend toward living in the city began in the early twentieth century, with an increase from 14 percent of all people living in cities around the world in 1900 to 47 percent doing so by the end of the century.

Worldwide, cities with one million or more people went from 83 in 1950 to 411 at the beginning of the twenty-first century. With the world's population anticipated in 2007 to double in about thirty-eight years, an increasing number of very large cities, with populations of over 10 million, was expected. In 2000, there were only eighteen mega-cities, for example, New York, Tokyo, Mexico City, and Bombay. In 2005, that number had increased to twenty. By 2010, the United Nations predicted that the number would rise to twenty-two mega-cities worldwide.

As of 2007, about 80 percent of the U.S. population lived in an urban setting, and the tendency to live in cities was predicted to continue. However, movement to the city was anticipated to slow for very large cities. In the case of cities with over ten million, the area becomes saturated, with little additional room for growth. Then midsize cities become the destination for people seeking urban locations. In the early 2000s, Phoenix,

San Antonio, San Diego, Jacksonville, Columbus, and Seattle were some of the midsize cities that were experiencing rapid growth.

Children's Literature

Children are often represented in Barbarese's poetry. In his poem "Walk Your Body Down,," Barbarese uses children to show the effects of adult actions, reactions, and breakdowns. Moreover, Barbarese taught children's literature on the college level, having made a study of this genre. Given this focus on children in Barbarese's work and his life, it is relevant to take a look at children's literature and its historical development.

Although fables, fairytales, and other stories have been used for many centuries to teach and to delight children, the credit for initiating the publication of children's literature is given to John Newbery (1713–1767), a British bookseller. Newbery, for whom the Newbery Award in children's literature is named, is supposedly the first person to offer books specifically geared to children. These books varied from alphabet books to novels for children, a new idea in the realm of bookselling at that time. One of the first novels to be published was reportedly Newbery's own (although some historians believe that Oliver Goldsmith might have been the real author of this story), *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes* in 1764, a variation on the fairytale *Cinderella* and the source of the saying that someone is a "goody-two-shoes," a reference to someone who always does what is right or good.

During the nineteenth century, children's literature continued to develop. Lewis Carroll (1832–1898) wrote his *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, published in 1865; Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) published his *Jungle Book* in 1894; and Robert L. Stevenson (1850–1894) penned his most famous work *Treasure Island* in 1883. The popularity of these books indicates the large audience of children they had.

During the twentieth century children's literature continued to grow. Moreover, children's literature became a subject taught in college, and several critical studies appeared on the subject, including those done through research centers such as the one at Rutgers where as of 2007 Barbarese worked at the Center for Children and Childhood Studies.

Critical Overview

Although the poetry of J. T. Barbarese can be found in many literary magazines and journals, his poetry collections have not been widely reviewed. This is true for Barbarese's collection *The Black Beach*, in which the poem "Walk Your Body Down" appears. Some poets, such as Eleanor Wilner (*Reversing the Spell*, 1998) have commented positively on Barbarese's work, and Maxine Kumin (*Jack and Other New Poems*, 2005) has stated how she enjoyed Barbarese's depictions of urban life.

The Black Beach won the 2004 Vassar Miller Prize, an award sponsored by the University of North Texas Press. Yet one of the few reviews available for Barbarese's collection is not very complimentary. Dan Chiasson, writing for *Poetry*, states: "If you choose the everyday as your subject matter, you risk inconsequence," which is how Chiasson sums up some of Barbarese's poems. Chiasson claims that Barbarese has a tendency to write poetry in a style that Chiasson calls "gritty-pretty." Barbarese, Chiasson writes, often begins with something pretty, such as a field of flowers then ends with a gritty image such as a truck driver. At another time, Barbarese opens a poem with an image of the narrator's daughter and closes with reference to the Holocaust. This pattern does not sit well with Chiasson, who concludes his review with the statement: "gritty-pretty has got to go."

In contrast, a reviewer for the *Wisconsin Bookwatch* praises Barbarese's collection. This reviewer points out that the collection "contrasts between everyday acts, such as putting children to bed or coaching Little League, and the mysteries that linger beyond the commonplace." The reviewer maintains: "*The Black Beach* is a profoundly inspired view of God and the cosmos as surely as it is a celebration of unsung heroes of parenting."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Hart has degrees in literature and creative writing. In this essay, she explores the title's meaning in Barbarese's poem.

J. T. Barbarese's poem "Walk Your Body Down" offers clear images of city life that include a couple arguing, a baby singing, crowded living conditions typical of urban living, and a sense of isolation felt by individuals in the midst of city crowds. There is little abstraction in the images, and the meanings or connotations are rather easily grasped. However, the title of the poem, as well as its message, is a little more difficult to understand. Just what exactly does the narrator mean by the recommendation to "walk your body down?" How does one do it? And is there anything in the poem itself that helps the reader answer these questions and understand the meaning of the title?

The man is talking to the people around him through his actions. He is the bearer of the message, and the message, according to this poem, is that people need to stay at home in their bodies and live their experiences through their bodies.

There is no way for a reader to know what the title means as the poem begins. After all, "walking one's body down" could refer to something negative, such as wearing one's body out until it falls down. In the second line of the poem, there is mention of breaking up, which could also be a reference to running something down until it no longer works. So at the beginning of the poem, there is no clue offered as to whether the title refers to something good or something bad.

In the first stanza, the narrator also offers a distressed baby that is sitting on a ramp, neither here nor there, alone and seemingly unprotected. Included with the arguing couple, the opening images, so far, suggest a breakdown of some kind, either in relationships, communications, or emotions. But when the narrator focuses attention on the middle-aged man something positive occurs. Here, the reader can grasp that this man and his way of walking, as well as the title, are meant to contradict the negative energy of the scene. The way the man walks down the center of the street ties him to the title, and readers can assume that the man is also connected to the meaning or message of the poem. The man in the street probably conveys what the title means.

This middle-aged man is described as self-contained and aloof, and no one cares about him. The narrator describes this man as he sees him, of course, through the lens of his own projections. Immediately the narrator relates to him, recognizing something familiar in the way the man moves and acts. It is interesting to note that the motion of the poem changes at the end of the first stanza. Here, the narrator distinguishes this man from the crowd, separating him from the city scene and from the narrator himself. Despite the fact that he identifies with the man, the narrator states that this man is unlike anyone else. Up until this point, everyone mentioned in the poem seems to be a bit off kilter.

The couple is arguing or discussing breaking up. The baby is maniacal or a bit crazed. But the man in the street seems completely disconnected from reality. Who else would put his life in danger for no apparent reason? But at this point in the poem, the narrator says this man is unique, and from this statement on, something positive begins to happen. The narrator starts to admire the man for his walking down the center of the street, despite the irrationality of that act. At first it seems that the narrator praises the man merely because the man is different from all the people around them. However, in the next stanza, the narrator's thoughts become a bit clearer, as does the meaning of the title.

The second stanza gives a sense that the opening images, which feel tense and agitated, run contrary to the title. The images that are provided are negative, whereas the title offers hope or, at least, some sense of direction. In the beginning of the poem, everything appears to be breaking up or breaking down. There are repeated images of suffering. But in the second stanza, in the middle of all this negativity, the narrator becomes focused on something else, something that is not breaking up at all: the man, who is now dancing, or making "stutter-steps," down the center line. The narrator is amazed. "Look at the way he strides," the narrator tells the reader, demanding that the reader pay attention. As the narrator watches, he is filled with pride because the middle-aged man is so confident and perfectly aware of what he is doing. The man is enjoying himself, more so than anyone else in the poem.

Why has the narrator chosen this man to deliver the message of the poem? What does this man represent? First, given his age, the man may be more aware of his mortality than a young couple or children are. He may realize time is precious. He is less likely to waste time in arguments, marrying for the wrong reasons, ignoring children who are in need. Time, like life, is to be appreciated, the narrator seems to be saying. Then, too, the man walks toward the twilight. In other words, this man approaches the end of his life. He is not afraid of death. He is not hiding from death. He is fully aware of it, and that is what motivates him. If one ignores one's own mortality, there is the chance that one may not live each moment fully. To be aware of death is to be mindful that time runs out, which in turn makes one appreciate every moment, every experience, and every emotion. This man walks not just for himself, according to the narrator, but for everyone who is watching him. "He strides," the narrator states, "as if to say, walk your body proudly into the twilight." The man is talking to the people around him through his actions. He is the bearer of the message, and the message, according to this poem, is that people need to stay at home in their bodies and live their experiences through their bodies.

Then the narrator states: "nothing is more memorable than ourselves." In other words, people are memorable, worth remembering. "O, walk your body down," the narrator states at the end of the poem. "Don't let it go it alone." In other words, people should dance through their lives as the man stutter-steps down the street. The man sees the "caskets of neighborhoods," the negative aspects of life, but this does not stop him from dancing. Although the man has withdrawn into himself in order to protect his warmth, he still takes chances. Regardless of the fact that he knows he is "alone as earth or air," he strides proudly. Because he recognizes his own uniqueness, he not only enjoys his life

but also becomes the messenger to others, reminding other people how to benefit from theirs.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on “Walk Your Body Down,” in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Dyer holds a Ph.D. in English literature and has published extensively on fiction, poetry, film, and television. He is also a freelance university teacher, writer, and educational consultant. In this essay, he discusses "Walk Your Body Down" as a poem that explores the speaker's realization that leading a controlled life, a wholly structured life, is what denies him access to the experiences of walking his body through a richly textured, albeit often painful, world.

Lyric poetry stresses emotional responses to personal struggles and to the fears associated with living in the contemporary world. For the speaker in J. T. Barbarese's "Walk Your Body Down" these fears come from a fragmenting sense of self and from a world that is no longer a familiar place. Trapped in a world that appears to be defined by the dynamics of "breaking up" and maniacal singing, the speaker finds himself in a world he struggles to understand. He finds himself withdrawing into an isolating "aloneness," an "aloof[ness]" from the society of which he is a part. He feels, like the "middle-aged black guy" he sees "walking / down the center of the street" as though he has been displaced from a harsh and uncaring world. It is a world, he acknowledges in the opening stanza, that leaves him feeling disconnected, "gathered into himself like an Arctic bird." In this poem, the speaker is doomed to feel "alone as earth or air," locked forever in his belief that "nobody else is like him anywhere."

Imagining ahead in time to the moment of his own death, when the mind/spirit and body separate permanently, the speaker reaches his lyric epiphany, a moment of profound illumination when the implications of his earlier stance (walking alone down the center line) is revealed.

Trapped by angst about a world that is shifting its values and definitions, Barbarese's speaker explores his own unconscious, only to find, or so he believes, that he is essentially alone in the world, walking down the center line of his life in order not to touch the feelings or ideas that invite him to either side. The life he lives is an inward looking one that refuses, by the power of his will, to avoid interaction with the world around him. He chooses, as the poem opens, to remain a man of disconnection rather than a man of engagement, a man who confuses his dedication to the center line with superiority and with safety.

Barbarese imagines his speaker as someone struggling with his sense of displacement in the world. From the opening moments of the poem, Barbarese leaves readers with the picture of a man trapped in his own private space, unable to escape and unwilling to believe that others can help. The speaker establishes clearly the psychological tone of his introspections: these are the ideas of a man who has given himself over to a sense of loss and to a physical, spiritual, and psychological isolation.

Despite an overwhelming sense of isolation and disconnection, the speaker describes community when he comes across a “middle-aged black guy” walking a center line. Whether this man is, in fact, another person or the speaker of the poem seeing himself from a different perspective is irrelevant. What is important is that in this other walker the speaker comes to recognize the inclusivity of “ourselves” as distinct from the more exclusive and limiting “myself.” The shift in language to include recognition of someone else on the line is a signal that the speaker of the poem is not as isolated as he first appears. As the poem unfolds, the speaker evolves toward companionship and through that companionship toward a sense of wholeness and the motivation to mobility. The speaker’s language, for instance, suggests that he and the other man will join together on the center line in the spirit of the journey being undertaken.

Balancing between the exclusiveness of the first person pronoun (the I/me voice of the poem) and the more inclusive you, us, and our connections of the poem, the speaker begins to combine his sensitive inner character and his more cynical, outward self. In these moments of imaginative negotiation with another man walking down the same center line, the speaker addresses his own personality, as if looking into a mirror and speaking to and about his own reflection. It is as though in these opening images of break ups and infant wailings that the speaker sets himself on a threshold, dancing carefully along a ledge of connecting and disconnecting with the world around him.

Shifting to mobility from immobility, the poem uses action verbs “look,” “walk,” and “remember,” to convey a possibility of movement and connection that expands the perspective of the speaker. In the actions of the second stanza, the poem begins to move “past” (another often repeated word) the stagnancy and dullness of the world that the speaker had seemed determined to inhabit as the poem opened.

Tellingly, the second stanza concludes with the speaker imagining a moment when, as he puts it, “the minds leaves the curb in its black cab.” Imagining ahead in time to the moment of his own death, when the mind/spirit and body separate permanently, the speaker reaches his lyric epiphany, a moment of profound illumination when the implications of his earlier stance (walking alone down the center line) is revealed. As the second stanza closes, in other words, the speaker realizes that he can move from a position of displacement toward placement within the community of wailing babies, arguing couples, and people holding conversations. Having moved “past” his limiting dedication to “the center line,” the speaker sees life through a different lens and as having a whole new range of possibilities.

The discoveries of this new and inclusive opportunity brings the speaker into two related and potentially problematic states. He is exposed to a new world that slips beyond his ability to articulate its complexities. The discoveries that he encounters are not themselves poetic musings on a life lived joyfully but are more like “stutter-steps” or mutterings that slide inevitably into incompleteness. “Conversations break up” and are deferred into promises of maturity. He looks to celebrate the cries of the “manic children” for what they are, raucous declarations of youthful vigor, while at the same time hoping for something more substantive and harmonious in the future.

At the same time, and even in the celebratory squeals of the children, the speaker comes to recognize that a life lived off the center line will involve an acknowledgement of “pain.” With openness comes *both* comfort (of connection and belonging) and pain, that takes hold inevitably, like the laws of physics.

Life is not about walking down the center line, the speaker comes to recognize, but is more akin to being “hurled up and down [a] ramp” on the edge of having control and losing it. But as the speaker learns during the course of the poem, to engage life fully is not to avoid the ramp (the ups and downs) but to engage the contours and dynamics of its angles with knowledge and with openness. The ramp is to be engaged with pride and companionship. As the speaker observes of the other line walker in the poem, the message is to “walk your body proudly into the twilight” and to ensure that it does not “go it alone.”

At first trapped in a veritable *cul de sac* of psychological inertia that collapses the energy of the poem into a straight line, the speaker transcends his sense of living trapped in a world that is fractured in terms of his psychology and his language. The angst he feels, however deep and existential, is finally dismantled by his willingness to focus on the world’s complexities. A perception that once denied circularity and elevation in favor of a flat line of control is expanded in the poem in such a way that the speaker identifies himself, finally, as a “memorable” part of a complex world. Exhausted from struggling to remain centered, the speaker steps away from the line and into a reality within which fullness of experience, both sensory and revelatory, will be realized.

Source: Klay Dyer, Critical Essay on “Walk Your Body Down,” in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #3

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, he examines the ways that this poem implicitly talks about the problem of alienation, and the answers that it offers to the problem

Poetry can be powerfully, breathtakingly effective when it gives a clear and concrete vision of life. It can also, however, be simply too concrete sometimes, when the vision of the world that it offers is so tightly focused that readers can only recognize objects and events in the poem but cannot make meaning of them. And then there is the other extreme, the poem that is all about what goes on in the writer's mind, filled with ideas that never quite relate to the physical world. When poetry goes wrong, it often means that the poet was unable to strike a workable balance between observation and meditation, between objectivity and subjectivity. Readers can feel left out of the poetic process if either the world of the mind or the world of the body is too dominant.

Readers may think that they know the speaker's isolation because it is reflected by the man in the street, but then they need to ask themselves: can the speaker really be isolated if he sees himself reflected in another person?

J. T. Barbarese is one poet who strikes a clear balance between observation and emotion without tilting too strongly toward either side. He often takes this balance as the subject of his work, as in his poem "Walk Your Body Down." In this poem, Barbarese describes what seems to be an everyday street scene. With strategic placement of his observations, though, and careful arrangement of the details, the poet is able to reveal more about the poem's speaker than letting the speaker explain himself ever could.

From the very start, "Walk Your Body Down" approaches the question of subjectivity by addressing what an individual is. The first few lines of the poem give quick sketches of characters that may be in physical proximity to each other but are trapped in their isolation. There is a couple in the process of breaking up. There is a baby whose uncomfortable crying is described as maniacal singing. And then there is the poem's speaker, observing the others—the distinction between him and them is a clear-cut one. They are the described subjects, and his is the subjective point of view, commenting on them. The poem gives the speaker's perspective, but without really revealing his views.

The only physical detail given about the setting is that these characters are on a ramp. The poet does not give readers much about the objective world, but they can piece it together if they are willing to speculate and take suggestions to their logical conclusions. This is obviously a public place, one that is modern enough in design to accommodate wheeled conveyances and casual enough that a baby would be brought there. It is outside. The signs point to a park: a pleasant setting for walking a baby, even if it is possibly too bucolic for a break-up. Since no one else is mentioned, and since babies

do not go to public places by themselves, it is quite likely that the baby referred to as being “on the ramp beside us” is, in fact, with the speaker and may be his own. Using such a strained, abstract expression to refer to one’s own child indicates the speaker’s sense of alienation, the poem’s main concern.

As the first stanza progresses, the speaker takes notice of what turns out to be the poem’s most interesting, most clearly described character. He is introduced as a “middle-aged black guy” with an “average build,” which tells readers practically nothing about him. There are two things, though, that make him important. First, the speaker thinks that this stranger resembles him. He sees himself reflected in the man walking up the middle of the street. Also, the man distinguishes himself with his unusual behavior, which just looks odd at first but ends up being a key to the question of subjectivity and objectivity that troubles the speaker.

There is no clear reason for why the speaker should identify with this man. That his build is average means that he is similar to many other people. His racial identity makes him similar to others. The thing the speaker seems to relate to most is that he is “gathered to himself like an Arctic bird.” Given what has already been established about the speaker’s sense of isolation—that he observes his child with curiosity and sees hostility around him—this observation says much more about the speaker than it does about the man he is describing. This speaker does not have to mention his feelings in order to convey the fact that he feels distanced from people. Barbarese then complicates his readers’ chances of understanding the speaker’s emotions by adding a self-contradicting element. Readers may think that they know the speaker’s isolation because it is reflected by the man in the street, but then they need to ask themselves: can the speaker really be isolated if he sees himself reflected in another person?

The solitary figure in the street introduces the following discussion of loneliness. Though the speaker knows nothing about the man, having never met him, he purports to be able to instantly read his body language well enough to claim that aloneness is, for him, natural, like one of the atomic elements, like “earth or air.” This connection between alienation and the mechanical nature of the material universe is echoed later in the poem, when the speaker refers to babies (not just his own, but others too) as being pushed up and down the ramp “like physics experiments.” Both descriptions share a stubborn refusal to acknowledge an internal, subjective life in the speaker or the babies.

It is this sort of casual associations that makes “Walk Your Body Down” able to imply much more beyond the events described in it. Barbarese draws a connection, via physics, between infancy and the man in the street, and then he goes on to draw a connection, via recognition, between the man and the speaker of the poem. Once this circuit is complete and accepted by the reader, the poem’s speaker has a right to claim he understands the thoughts going on within all parties mentioned.

What is not made clear, however, is whether the jump made by his identification is real or imaginary. The structure of “Walk Your Body Down” does not allow Barbarese any room to comment on whether it is interpretation or psychological projection that makes the poem’s narrator think he knows how the man in the street feels. If it is interpretation,

then readers can accept his claims about the man as the truth, but there are good odds that the speaker is just projecting his own sense of loneliness onto the other man. When the speaker says of the other man that “his aloneness [is] at home here,” he is clearly speaking of his own feelings, but do these feelings really apply to both of them? The actual nature of the relationship between these two men is the poem’s greatest mystery.

Whether the narrator shares the other man’s feelings or is just making up a fantasy about him in order to understand himself, the important thing is that, in the end, the poem offers a cure for loneliness, a way to resolve the pain caused by the estrangement of mind from body. This is what the speaker learns from the man walking in the street. Regardless of whether the other man finds this a good resolution—and, from his cool demeanor, it is likely that he does—the important thing is that the speaker of the poem feels it is true.

The process of overcoming isolation starts early, even before the problem is identified. Soon after the other man’s arrival on the scene, the narrator begins, interestingly, to address another person. The second and third lines of the second stanza direct some unnamed and unexplained person to “look at” the other man’s movements. This is more than a case of the poetic convention that lets a speaker address the audience in the second person. For one thing, it comes in late, more than half way through the poem, and even then it is not carried consistently throughout the remaining lines, and so cannot really be considered a shift in the poem’s style.

Another thing that makes this form of address stand out is that it bears such a slight relationship to the lives of those addressed or the person doing the addressing. Instead of discussing the events that have already been described, it directs readers’ attention to physical details that they cannot see: things that are happening in the world of the poem, but that have not yet been explained. Giving commands in this way is a more emphatic, more excited way of calling attention to the details that the speaker is pointing out, as if the speaker of the poem cannot contain himself, but it also makes a sublime statement about loneliness. The alienated speaker of the first few lines of the poem suddenly feels that there is someone to talk to, someone with whom he can share the marvel of the extraordinary individual that he is observing.

Having covered loneliness and bonding, there is one other major element to the mind/body duality that the poem faces: death. This is eased into the poem with the mention of walking “into the twilight,” but in subsequent lines it becomes a major part of the poem’s focus. Neighborhoods are describes as caskets, and, eventually, the body is reduced to being nothing more than a black cab—a hearse—in which the mind rides away.

Here, the speaker reveals his anxieties most clearly. This concern about death, of existing in the lifeless physical world and then, eventually, the mind being separated from the lifeless body, turns out to be what is concerning him and him alone. There is no indication that the man in the street or the poem’s other characters share this concern. It might be thought that the awareness of death is supposed to be assumed as an underlying factor behind all of the crying, conversing, and breaking up, but the poem

does not really make this an issue. When death is brought into the poem, the issue being examined becomes much clearer, as does the poem's basic relationship: the speaker of the poem understands the problem and the man in the street knows the solution, and peace will come when each is able to learn from the other.

The world that the poem's speaker sees is a harsh one. Babies know pain and they expect it to go on for eternity; couples get together, but the illusion of human connection can only last a short while before they break up; and then there is death. For the man walking up the street, however, the world is a placid place, even though he is physically separated from everyone else, at risk of being run over, and unable to walk straight. There is no question that he is isolated: what the speaker needs to find out is how he can cope so well with the isolation. The man walking up the middle of the street is immune to the pain, alienation, and knowledge of death that complicate life, and the poet's task is to find out how others can reach the same attitude.

Clearly, the solution is not to simply be or play ignorant. This is probably what others see when they view the walking man: he seems unaware of how strange his behavior is, of the danger of walking in the middle of the street. It is common in most urban areas to find such people, people who stand out because of their odd behavior, and usually they are ignored or pitied. The fact that the poem's speaker identifies with this man, finds kinship with him, may be left unexplained because it violates a basic social principle, which is that those who take no stock of life's miseries are assumed to have some sort of mental problem, an inability to see that such misery exists. Simply acknowledging the man, taking him as someone who might be important, takes this poem at least halfway toward the solution that it seeks.

In the end, the solution to alienation turns out to be nothing about social relationships at all, but all about the relationship that the mind has with the body. The key phrase in the last line, "walk your body down," is a mirror of the line from stanza 2, "Walk your body proudly into the twilight." At the end of the poem, though, it takes on a religious tone, starting with "O" and including an echo of the language of old spirituals such as "Go Down, Moses." This is clearly meant to be the bottom line, the heart of the poem. And Barbarese finishes off the thought with "don't let it"—that is, your body—"go it alone."

What is so compelling about the man walking in the street is that, estranged from other people, he is still a complete person, because he is comfortable within his own body. Though the poem does still, in the end, admit that the body is a separate thing from the mind/spirit/personality, it puts the relationship between the two into perspective. The body must be taken care of, because it is just a physical thing, but, even more importantly, one must be a companion to it. There may be duality, but there is also equality.

"Walk Your Body Down" is written with the kind of passivity that a casual observer might have about common events that are going on around him on a typical day. As every good poem should, though, it uses its observations to reveal complex truths. In this case, the alienation of the individual, viewing the objective world from a subjective perspective, that becomes more and more torturous as one reads deeper. The speaker

of the poem fixates on one lone individual, and it takes a while to understand why: that individual, with his erratic behavior, is the only person in the poem who knows what the body and soul have to do with one another.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on “Walk Your Body Down,” in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• J. T. Barbarese mentions in his poem “Walk Your Body Down” “manic children” who, like the babies on the ramp, “go up and down.” This is possibly an allusion to bipolar disorder or manic depressive illness. Find out what this illness is. What are the symptoms? How does it affect children? What are doctors doing to help children with this illness? Present your research findings to your class.

• Form a panel to discuss Barbarese’s use of race, as in the passage, “middle-aged black guy.” Pose the question: Why does the poet mention that this man is black? If race is important, why is the couple sitting next to the narrator not described in terms of race? Why are the children not identified by race? What do you think is the purpose of mentioning race at all? To prepare for the panel, make a survey of news articles (print, television, Internet) to see how many times race is an issue. If the focus person is white, is his or her race mentioned? What happens when the focus person is black? Use your findings to open the panel discussion.

• Write a description (about 300 words) of something you have observed that affected you in some way. The subject could be something simple but beautiful, like a walk along a beach, or it could be dramatic, such as witnessing a car accident or the death of a pet. Write this in the form of prose narrative, a story. When you are finished, arrange the lines of your story so that it looks like free verse. Use enjambment to emphasize certain points. Isolate certain phrases that you think represent key descriptions. Rearrange or change words and delete whatever is not necessary so that your poem fits on one page. Read both versions, the prose narrative and the free verse poem to your class. Which one do class members like better? Which one do you prefer? Why?

• Barbarese’s poem depicts a city scene. Draw or paint a picture that represents this scene as you imagine it.

What Do I Read Next?

- Barbarese in his 1986 collection *Under the Blue Moon* focuses on everyday events and uses them to help depict and explain the world.

- Recipient of the MacArthur Prize (often referred to as the Genius Prize), Eleanor Wilner's 1997 collection, *Reversing the Spell*, contains previously published work along with new poems. Wilner has been called a lifelong civil rights advocate, and her poems reflect her vision of art and life.

- Maxine Kumin's *Jack and Other Poems* (2005) centers on nature, such as found around her New Hampshire farm, and on political history. The poet looks for answers to the bloodshed and political upheaval that bombards her in the news.

- Pulitzer Prize–winning poet Mary Oliver has written a guide for budding poets, *The Poetry Handbook* (1994). Oliver explains various aspects of the craft of writing a poem and provides examples from such great poets as James Wright and Elizabeth Bishop. Oliver even offers her views on the merits of writers' workshops for poetry.

Further Study

Collins, Billy, ed., *Best American Poetry 2006*, Scribner, 2006.

Poetry in this annual collection is gathered from current literary magazines and other publications in the given year.

Ferguson, Margaret, ed., *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th edition, W. W. Norton, 2004.

This poetry volume includes 340 poets, ranging from Shakespeare to contemporary poets. Also included are guides to reading and understanding poetry.

Fry, Stephen, *The Ode Less Traveled: Unlocking the Poet Within*, Gotham, 2006.

Fry is all in favor of having fun with writing poetry. His book covers various aspects of writing poetry, including rhythm, rhyme, and several poetic forms.

Sitomer, Alan Lawrence, *Hip-Hop Poetry and the Classics*, Milk Mug, 2004.

A high school teacher, Sitomer has put together a comparison of hip-hop poetry and classic poems. Comparisons include Robert Frost's poetry and Public Enemy and Shakespeare's poetry with lyrics by Eminem. This book offers a different way of reading the classics and appreciating the lyrics of contemporary poetry.

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Barbarese, J. T., “Walk Your Body Down,” in *The Black Beach*, University of North Texas Press, 2005, p. 3.

Chiasson, Dan, “Eight Takes,” in *Poetry*, Vol. 187, No. 2, November 2005, pp. 143–55.

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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

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

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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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