

The War Against the Trees Study Guide

The War Against the Trees by Stanley Kunitz

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Introduction

"The War Against the Trees" is included in Stanley Kunitz's third volume of poetry *Selected Poems, 1928-1958*. Though *Selected Poems* was rejected by eight publishers—three of whom did not read the manuscript—the collection won the 1959 Pulitzer Prize. In the Author's Note to *Selected Poems*, Kunitz writes that the poems are not arranged chronologically but "in groups that bear some relevance to the themes, the arguments, that have preoccupied me since I began to write." The grouping that contains "The War Against the Trees," entitled "The Terrible Threshold," is likely so-named because the poems in it describe various ways in which humanity and the earth are on the brink of catastrophic change. It is the last poem in the section. Perhaps the reason "The War Against the Trees" appears in many anthologies is partially due to its obvious sympathies with environmental causes.

"The War Against the Trees" describes bulldozers toppling and digging out plants and large trees on a parcel of lawn recently purchased by an oil company. The poet mourns the loss of the past, of nature, and the absence of human concern for the "war's" victims, the plants and animals. Before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* helped inspire the environmental movement, "The War Against the Trees" recognized the local attack on a plot of land as part of a larger, undeclared war on nature. In an interview with Kunitz, critic Selden Rodman asserts that "The War Against the Trees" was an early ecological statement. Kunitz agreed, quipping that "one of the measures of art is the amount of wilderness it contains."



Author Biography

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1905, Stanley Jasspon Kunitz was the youngest of three children of Russian-Jewish parents. Six weeks before Kunitz's birth, his father, a thirty-nine-year-old dress manufacturer, killed himself in a park by ingesting carbolic acid. Kunitz's mother kept the family going by supporting herself as a supervising seamstress and married again when Kunitz was eight. But her new husband died just one year later. In high school, Kunitz was captain of the debating team, founder of a literary magazine (in which he printed his first poem), and class valedictorian. During these years, Kunitz worked summers at the *Worcester Telegram* as a cub reporter. After high school, he attended Harvard, where he won the Lloyd McKim Garrison Medal for Poetry in 1926. That same year he graduated *summa cum laude*. He completed a master's degree at Harvard in 1927, and expected to teach there, but was not hired because he was Jewish.

After Harvard, Kunitz published poems in *Poetry*, *Commonweal*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, and *Dial*. He also returned to the *Worcester Telegram*, for which he covered the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Kunitz became convinced the defendants—poor Italian immigrants accused of a payroll robbery and murder—would never receive justice from a judge who labeled them "anarchistic bastards." Kunitz fought to save Sacco and Vanzetti from what he thought to be a miscarriage of justice, but in August, 1927, both men were electrocuted. Kunitz moved to New York City where he unsuccessfully attempted to find a publisher for Vanzetti's death—row letters. Shortly after, he began work at the H. W. Wilson Company, a publishing house, whom he was with from 1928 until the 1970s. At *Wilson*, Kunitz edited the house journal, the *Wilson Bulletin for Librarians*, and wrote a monthly column. More importantly, Kunitz edited nine respected biographical dictionaries.

In 1943, at age thirty-seven, Kunitz was drafted. Because of his objection to bearing arms, the military designated him a nonaffiliated pacifist. He hoped to be assigned to the Medical Corps, but spent much of the war ill and humiliated from digging latrines and KP ("kitchen patrol") duty. At the same time, his second book of poems, *Passport to the War* (1944) was published. During his service, Kunitz received a letter from Bennington College asking him to teach at the end of the war. His friend, Bennington poet and teacher, Theodore Roethke, had suffered a nervous breakdown and insisted on Kunitz replacing him. At war's end, Kunitz received a Guggenheim Fellowship and in the fall of 1946 began teaching at Bennington, the first of many part-time positions at distinguished colleges and universities. In 1958 "The War Against the Trees" appeared in *Selected Poems, 1928-1958*. This same year, Kunitz divorced his second wife and married his third, won the Harriet Monroe Award and a Ford Foundation grant, and was appointed poet-in-residence at Brandeis University. In 1959, Kunitz won the Pulitzer Prize for *Selected Poems* and the National Institute of Arts and Letters award.



Poem Text

The man who sold his lawn to standard oil
Joked with his neighbors come to watch the show
While the bulldozers, drunk with gasoline,
Tested the virtue of the soil
Under the branchy sky
By overthrowing first the privet-row.
Forsythia-forays and hydrangea-raids
Were but preliminaries to a war
Against the great-grandfathers of the town,
So freshly lopped and maimed.
They struck and struck again,
And with each elm a century went down.
All day the hireling engines charged the trees,
Subverting them by hacking underground
In grub-dominions, where dark summer's mole
Rampages through his halls,
Till a northern seizure shook
Those crowns, forcing the giants to their knees.
I saw the ghosts of children at their games
Racing beyond their childhood in the shade,
And while the green world turned its death-foxed page
And a red wagon wheeled,
I watched them disappear
Into the suburbs of their grievous age.
Ripped from the craters much too big for hearts
The club-roots bared their amputated coils,
Raw gorgons matted blind, whose pocks and scars
Cried Moon! On a corner lot
One witness-moment, caught
In the rear-view mirrors of the passing cars.



Plot Summary

Stanza 1

The poem opens with a man and his neighbors watching bulldozers tear up the man's lawn. The man is joking with the neighbors, and the event is referred to as a "show." The man's upbeat behavior suggests that he has sold the land for a good price. "Branchy sky" indicates that this parcel of "lawn" has quite a few trees on it, as the branches seem as much a part of the sky as of the tree. Contributing to the carnival-like atmosphere is the personification of the bulldozers as sloppy males on a date, who, "drunk with gasoline," force themselves on the woman, as they test the "virtue of the soil." This last phrase is also ironic since the bulldozers are not concerned with the soil's quality, as farmers are, but with what lies beneath the soil.

Stanza 2

Stanza two begins full mobilization of the language of war ("forays" and "raids"). The bulldozers-as-tanks, having taken out what would be the first line of defense, the privet-row, now take out the second line—forsythias and hydrangeas. But the real "enemy" lies ahead. Bulldozers head for the hard-to-root-out trees, analogous to a nest of machine guns protected by lines of surrounding troops. The trees themselves are monuments of a civilization, and every time an elm fell "a century went down." In a familiar metaphor the trees are also likened to human bodies, as they are described as having been "lopped and maimed." This is akin to the trees' beheading, or the hacking of limbs from their torsos (trunk), an occurrence in humanto- human war. The offensiveness of the acts is heightened because the trees are humanized, referred to as the "great-grandfathers of the town."

Stanza 3

The war continues as bulldozers and Caterpillars ("hireling engines") dig up tree after tree. The limbs and tops have already been hacked away and the roots are the last to go. The speaker remarks that undermining the trees also destroys the habitat of soil grubs and moles, a destruction of beings and ecology. Then, as in the previous stanza, trees are again linked to humans: they are kings when standing (they have "crowns"), and subservient subjects when felled (on their "knees," as if begging). The final personification is the death throes or tremblings the trees suffer before dying, their "seizures." That is, their leafy tops ("northern") can be seen to shake before the trees topple and fall.



Stanza 4

From the effect of bulldozers on trees and land, Kunitz now moves to the larger picture affected by both the presence and absence of trees. He imagines children of the past ("ghosts") playing in the trees' shade, growing up alongside the trees. The poet also imagines nature ("the green world") with a book, perhaps its own biography or photo album, turning another worn ("foxed") page, perhaps reading about or viewing another slaughter in its own history. At stanza's end, the children disappear into "their grievous age," which could indicate either crippling old age and death or the era in which the children live, the 1950s, when suburban developments flourished. The word "suburbs," short for suburban, indicates a kind of environment where trees are cut down and substituted with housing developments. It can also represent a place where people sometimes grow "grievously" into old age because they become isolated and preoccupied only with raising children and maintaining property. This is the suburbs as the breeding place of sameness and mediocrity, to some, a living death.

Stanza 5

In the last stanza, the trees are down and uprooted, leaving behind craters "too big for hearts," the phrase pointing to the inability of humans to love, care, or protect trees. From being maimed in root and branch, the killing field is now complete—roots are now "amputated" from the soil, exposed for all to see. The poet compares the huge snarls of roots to gorgons, mythological female creatures with snakes for hair who turned those looking at them into stone.

With this vision of a pock-marked landscape, the poet imagines the cornered lot as a cratered moon, a dead landscape. But others do not necessarily see the scene as the poet does. They see it like the joking neighbor at the beginning, or like drivers glancing for a "witness-moment" in their rearview mirrors, giving the scene no more than a passing or backward glance on their way to other scenes and concerns more important, or more subject to their control. By the final line and word, the poem has come full circle: from producers of oil (Standard Oil) clearing the land at the beginning of the poem, to consumers of oil driving over cleared and paved land at poem's end. For only a moment, drivers might have the opportunity to link their own practice to the unsightly mess on the corner lot.



Themes

Growth and Development

"The War Against the Trees" recounts the bulldozing of a plot of wooded land recently purchased by an oil company and the effect of this destruction on the town and speaker. Throughout the 1950s, an average of three thousand acres of farmland were bulldozed per day for tract housing. Such development was partially enabled by preexisting roads allowing commutes to and from outlying areas. In the fifties, exploding suburban development (houses and stores), caused, in turn, construction of newer and larger roads to accommodate the everrising numbers of cars that transformed the United States into an oil-dependant nation. And finally, in this chain reaction, increasing oil consumption led to the bulldozing of more land (as in "The War Against the Trees") to look for oil and provide to the consumer. While Kunitz does not tell readers exactly what purpose the poem's cleared land will serve, he does write that the bulldozers operate at the behest of Standard Oil, one of the largest oil companies in the world. Against this background, the poem supplies a foreground. Whether slated for offices or drilling operations, the land is eradicated of its flora and denuded of its fauna for the sake of what is usually called growth and development. While *growth* and *development* are usually considered positive terms, Kunitz paints the practices behind those words with a more critical brush. "The bulldozers, drunk with gasoline" ready land for more oil production (whether through drilling or administration of delivery systems) thereby enabling mobility. Greater mobility, in turn, leads to more bulldozing of land for roads, development, and oil production. This cycle from production to consumption, commonly referred to as "growth and development," Kunitz calls "war."

War and Peace

If the poet refers to growth and development as a war against nature, it appears he thinks there are more battalions of soldiers than the one driving the bulldozers. Another regiment works for the oil company and still another drives cars (Kunitz seems to have left out only road and store builders). Growth and development are usually considered peacetime activities, but Kunitz construes them as acts of war. Human activity can be divided into two major categories, wartime and peacetime. People already know that war kills, not just people, but plants and animals as well. But in "The War Against the Trees," readers are asked to consider that peace also kills, that peace is also war, less against masses of humanity, but more against masses of plants and animals. The result, as Kunitz sees it, is a devastated battlefield replete with craters, a moonscape devoid of life—human, animal, and vegetable.



Memory and Reminiscence

When the poem's "corner lot" is bulldozed, plants are killed and animals destroyed and exiled ("the green world turned its death-foxed page"). Something else is killed as well: The past. In the third stanza Kunitz seems to recall a childhood filled with trees, where children played and grew up in the shade. Now he sees an aging process he terms "grievous," partially because it occurs in a figurative or real suburb with little flora and fauna, and no wilderness. This denuded space is also metaphorically the space of memory, now wiped clean of fond reminiscence, scoured of nostalgia called upon during the often difficult process of growing old, of being what is often termed, "replaced." If the trees are killed off, the past will be too, and, Kunitz thinks, will no more be a "place" to revisit. The only thing left will be a future devoid of plants and animals and refilled with a very human culture of growth and development. Neither of these terms, the poem suggests, should be confused with progress.

Style

"The War Against the Trees" consists of a total of thirty lines organized into five stanzas of six lines each. In each stanza, at least two lines rhyme. Rhyme is always masculine, that is, monosyllabic, as in show/row, town/down, and scars/cars. These rhyming lines are further unified by having approximately the same number of syllables and accents, and generally, the same rhythm, either iambic tetrameter or pentameter. Finally, these lines are united by their appearance on the page, by extending farther than the stanza's other lines. Together, these similarities constitute a "major pair." In addition to the major pairs, there are also minor pairs, "minor" because if the lines rhyme, as in lines 1 and 4 (oil/soil), they do not share the same number of syllables. The rhyme in the minor pairs is sometimes a form of off-rhyme or assonance, as in stanza two's "raids" / "maimed" / "again."

By assigning human attributes to inanimate things, Kunitz personifies both technology, as in the bulldozers, and nature, as in the trees and plants. The nineteenth-century art critic John Ruskin took a dim view of making human the inhuman and termed this literary device "pathetic fallacy." Ruskin believed the primary criterion of art and literature is truth, and saw in personification a form of literally lying about the appearance of things. Ruskin's criticism, however, is dismissed by many, and the use of personification, in all genres of literature, continues.

Historical Context

When World War II ended in 1945, some ten million American soldiers were discharged from the armed forces. To shelter them, housing developments were built outside the city. Though suburbs existed in America before the fifties, they were nothing like those to come. The most infamous and influential plan for suburbia was Levittown, located on Long Island, New York. On July 3, 1950, William J. Levitt appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in front of a row of identical boxlike houses on freshly bulldozed land. The caption read: "House Builder Levitt. For Sale: A New Way of Life." First on Long Island, then near Philadelphia, and in New Jersey, Levitt helped model the suburbia of the 1950s. In October 1947, the first Levittown home was purchased, just one of many mass-produced, affordable, look-alike houses characterizing 1950s suburbia. These developments helped foment middle-class migration to the suburbs and the need for more and larger high-speed roads to handle high-powered cars. Not only were houses nearly identical, but lots as well, with a tree planted every twenty-eight feet (two-and-a-half trees per home). In the beginning, Levitt included a free television set and a washing machine as incentives to buy. Homeowners could not build fences, lawns had to be mowed at least once a week, and laundry could be hung on rotary racks only, not on lines, and never on weekends. Despite such restrictions, 1.4 million housing units were built in 1950. The rate continued throughout the decade, an average of three thousand acres of farmland bulldozed per day for tract housing. By 1952, Long Island's Levittown population was ten thousand, and Pennsylvania's Levittown could accommodate seventeen thousand families.

"The War Against the Trees," while commonly appearing in modern poetry anthologies, is nearly absent from criticism. It seems that only Selden Rodman finds the poem worthy of comment, asking Kunitz in an interview whether "The War Against the Trees" wasn't "a primer of ecology." Rodman's observation is not surprising given the interview took place in 1971, not long after the sanctioning of environmentalism with the first Earth Day in April 1970. More remarkable, however, is that "The War Against the Trees" (1958) was published well before what by some accounts was the inspiration for America's modern environmental movement—the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962.

Critical Overview

Although critics have ignored "The War Against the Trees," they have not ignored *Selected Poems*, the volume in which it appears. In 1958, poet and critic David Wagoner wrote that the eighty-five poems in *Selected Poems* "exhibit a simultaneously delightful and frightening mind. Its ways are intricate, surprising, and clear; but they occasionally lead so deep or so far forward that the reader performing Pound's 'dance along the intellect' discovers himself in a country where he is his own most dangerous enemy, where he is forced to choose sides at the bottom of his own mind." In the case of "The War Against the Trees," that choice might refer to the tough one between nature and development. Nine years later, Jean H. Hagstrum remarked that "the latest poems (which include "The War Against the Trees") make the old metaphysical boldness even bolder and intensify the already unparaphrasable imagistic intensity. At the same time, the long colloquial line of 1944 has now become a marvel of flexible strength. Suffusing these familiar effects is a golden romanticism..." Had Hagstrum specifically addressed the case of "The War Against the Trees," she might have supplied one more adjective to describe that "golden romanticism": A *frustrated* golden romanticism. Robert Weisburg picks up the issue of Kunitz's romanticism in his "Stanley Kunitz: The Stubborn Middle Way": "Kunitz, in fact, is a devout Romantic in his adherence to the natural world as his model for human experience, though he has successfully transformed nature from Wordsworthian harmony and sublimity to the modern disfigurement he must deal with, especially by dealing more with man's body than with earth's body." This is less true of "The War Against the Trees," where the human heart is too small to save the "earth's body" from desertification, disfigurement, and death. But Weisburg is certainly correct, in terms of "The War Against the Trees," when he writes that harmony between humans and nature is non-existent. Not just non-existent, but as fallen as if Adam and Eve had themselves driven the bulldozers.

Criticism

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



Critical Essay #1

Semansky's most recent collection of poems, Blindsided, has been published by 26 Books of Portland, Oregon and nominated for an Oregon book award. In the following essay, Semansky examines Kunitz's "The War Against the Trees," paying close attention to the complexity of the poet's word choice.

"The War Against the Trees" appears in several popular classroom anthologies of poetry, yet little about the poem exists in the biographical literature about Kunitz, or in the substantial criticism focused on his *Selected Poems* (1958), the volume in which "The War Against the Trees" appears. Perhaps this is because the poem seems self-evident. Or, from a different angle, so fragile that vigorous investigation would "break" it. While these arguments are not without their virtues (as is true for many poems), "The War Against the Trees" is neither so simple that deeper analysis cannot reveal its complexity, nor so fragile it cannot be shaken up without shattering its message. A close reading of the poem, with special attention paid to Kunitz's word choice, will help to unpack its complexity.

In the first line of "The War Against the Trees," "standard oil," a proper noun, is not capitalized. The effect is to diminish the company's real value, the poet, careful to avoid showing respect for a company bulldozing a parcel of land home to trees, flowers, and a vibrant underground ecology. The man who has sold the corner property is, Kunitz writes, "joking" with others watching the "show." "Laughed" is not employed because the word would seem a direct response to the "show," and would connote direct joy in the destruction, a kind of sadism. "Joking," however, indicates a response less evil, an unconcern about, or ignorance of, the fuller meanings of this destruction. To these neighbors (or at least the man who sold the property), it is as if these trees and flowers were inanimate objects or mere things. This is not bloodsport, but a celebration of *action*, of noise and movement of bulldozers, the crash of big trees. The tone of this "celebration" is underscored by the description of the bulldozers, which are "drunk with gasoline." Drunkenness personifies these machines, possibly prompting readers to think of drunken males in cars on a destructive spree, and then to bring readers back to the watching neighbors—are they drunk as well? Whatever the case, these neighbors would likely have been just as satisfied having attended a demolition derby or monster truck rally. This is a scene no one except the poet understands as a killing field. Instead, this seems a harmless arena to an audience as oblivious to the killing as are the bulldozers.

In "The War Against the Trees," personification works both ways—to vilify and dignify. In the second stanza, personification is employed not only to vilify bulldozers, but to dignify plants. Kunitz casts the plants as under attack by the bulldozers-as-tanks. Unfortunately, the metaphor begins to backfire if taking tall trees seems like taking an enemy bunker of big guns or missile launchers. But Kunitz prevents such thoughts from proceeding when he calls the trees "great-grandfathers," "lopped and maimed." This directs the comparison away from trees as enemies to trees as human-like victims, especially through the attribute of having severed limbs. Bulldozers represented as cars



full of drunk males or tanks, and trees characterized as old men with severed limbs not only portrays this happening as an unfair fight, but as a destruction of the past (grandfathers) by the present (youth), a theme revisited in the poem's fourth stanza.

The third stanza's "hireling engines," might conjure up an image of mercenaries (a further personification of bulldozers) hired by Standard Oil to "pacify" the site, eradicate from this corner lot any obstacles to development making it "safe" for business. "Hacking" is a verb describing a repulsive act, building empathy for the trees by casting them as living victims. Kunitz's sensitivity extends not only to plants, but to what are usually disliked and unconsidered ground-dwellers, moles and grubs. Kunitz, however, dignifies the moles as human, as possessors of homes with "halls" under attack from humans and their machines. Grubs are exalted by having "dominions" making it not just grub homes suffering an attack, but grub communities and lands. From the ground's smallest and most hidden creatures, Kunitz fast cuts to the largest and sometimes most visible, the "giants" of the sky: trees. These giant grandfathers, king-or queen-like with their crowns, are now humbled, forced to their "knees" in submission to the new, self-crowned kings of the wood, humans. This exaltation of plants and "lower" animals is the kind of sensibility describable as *biophilia*, care for all that lives. Kunitz, however, goes further by dignifying plants and animals, and, at the same time, vilifying humans. Or more precisely, vilifying a specified set of human actions.

If personification is Kunitz's tool to enliven and vilify machines, and, in addition, extra-enliven and dignify nature, a rather opposite technique is employed on people, one depicting them as not fully alive. If, in the first stanza, the neighbors can be said to be "dead" to the import of the events in front of them, the fourth stanza is inhabited by the "ghosts of children." The word "shade" enhances the real and figurative deaths in this scene. Shade describes not only the shade of trees but, in a long literary tradition, the state of a person after death, as in the phrase describing the afterworld, "land of the shades." Children playing in the shade of trees, "racing beyond their childhood," says Kunitz, disappear into "grievous old age," die and become shades. Kunitz seems to say that an absence of treeshade—which describes many a sparsely-arbored, fifties suburb—hastens people into the "suburbs" of human old age, and finally, the "suburbs" of death (life as urban), a final move to the land of shades. Such a claim might be explained this way: eradication of trees and plants helps kill off memories of what was, pushes humans increasingly into hope for an unknown and suspect future, hastens time and therefore, the approach of death. Nostalgia and cognizance, on the other hand, work to slow time, to make aging less grievous, less, if you will, suburban. "Suburbs," then, not only describes a place outside the "urb(an)," but a purgatory on the edge of life, an anteroom to the land of the shades.

In stanza four, "the green world," or nature, is again personified—nature turns the page of an old book, its own biography. Nature has a long tradition of comparison to a book, one that with the *Book of God* comprised the two-volume set of the *Book of Life*. Nature turning the pages of its own book is a kind of objectification (nature as book), personification, and deification (nature as a kind of god or demiurge) rolled into one. The particular page nature turns is "death-foxed," not just yellowed or brown with age, but possibly inhabited by images of nature's losses like a page of deceased relatives in



a family photo album. If the picture conjured up from Kunitz's description is of nature sadly turning the pages of its own history, mourning its losses at the hand of its own children (humanity), the reader's response might be one similar to Christ crucified: empathy for a god under attack from its own, from those who know not what they do.

As one might expect from the title, "The War Against the Trees," the poem's last stanza brings readers back to those victims of "war," those "great-grandfathers of the town / So freshly lopped and maimed," those "giants" brought "to their knees" in a "seizure" of death. In this last stanza, the trees are toppled, their roots exposed. The craters left behind are "too big for hearts," these giants being larger in size and in sensitivity than the humans killing them. Kunitz calls the exposed roots, "club-roots" which is also the name for a plant disease caused by a slime mold. Symptoms of the disease include large malformed roots. Because this definition does not fit well with these toppled, healthy elms, club-root is probably a play on *club foot*, defined as "a congenitally deformed or distorted foot." Add this personification of tree roots to the word, "amputated," that follows, and readers are not only presented with murdered bodies, but deformed corpses. The image of club-roots radically morphs with the word, "gorgons," female monsters with snakes for hair who turn those looking at them to stone. "Gorgons" is a somewhat imperfect attribution because the word might provoke a conflation of trees with monsters rather than tree corpses as monstrous. Apart from this quibble, "gorgons" is effective because the exposure, *the sight*, of "club-roots" indicates that the once-green earth is being desertified into a treeless, stony moonscape. These gorgons, however, are different from the blindness-causing gorgons of myth since the club-roots do not *cause* blindness, but *are* blind, another injury to these sympathy-provoking trees already "maimed," "lopped," "amputated," and brought "to their knees."

In the last stanza's fourth line, the blindness metaphor is mixed with an aural component when the gorgon roots cry "Moon," a kind of synesthesia where a sight (and site) is so offensive it "cries out" to be heard. Yet Kunitz seems doubtful anyone else hears the trees crying out, even if "caught / in the rear-view mirrors of passing cars." More likely it is that upon seeing the site, drivers will not view it as a slaughter, like the poet. Or, if they do, Kunitz thinks they will be too busy to give it much thought. And if a driver should stop her car and ask Mr. Kunitz (is he not one of the witnesses?) who it is that's bulldozing the land, he just might answer, "All of us."

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.



Critical Essay #2

*Barron is an associate professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi. He has coedited **Jewish American Poetry** (University Press of New England) and **Roads Not Taken: Rereading Robert Frost** (University of Missouri Press), as well as a forthcoming collection of essays on the poetic movement, *New Formalism. Beginning in 2001, he will be the editor-in-chief of The Robert Frost Review. In the following essay he examines the structure of Kunitz's "The War Against The Trees."**

In "The War Against the Trees," Kunitz weaves together two ancient poetic forms using metrical lines that depend in every stanza on at least one set of rhymes. First, he engages the ancient pastoral tradition that depends on the opposition between mechanized civilization and the agrarian life of farms, and pastures. Second, he sets his pastoral poem into a prophetic context: he uses his poem as an occasion to charge his readers with moral, even theologically based fervor about a grave injustice, a terrible transgression.

The pastoral element of the poem is the most readily noticed. Generally speaking, a pastoral poem is any poem that takes nature as its occasion. In fact, however, the genre of pastoral poetry is a bit more complex and nuanced. Recently, a scholar of pastoral poetry, Paul Alpers, declared that people, not nature, make a poem pastoral. While the poem must contain nature, it must do more than merely describe the flora and fauna. According to Alpers, ever since the ancient Greeks first set pastoral verse to parchment it has been the case that "we will have a far truer idea of pastoral if we take its representative anecdote to be herdsmen and their lives, rather than landscape or idealized nature." To Alpers, this means that pastoral poetry always concerns and explores a relationship between people and nature, not just nature all by itself. Further, as a poetic type, pastoral poetry defines itself by asking what the nature of that human relationship to nature might be. Because it does this, he says, pastoral poetry inevitably contains social and ethical themes. According to Alpers, one can recognize a pastoral poem by its formal structure. That structure, he says, depends on the following plot: a person in nature addresses some natural object which, in turn, raises serious questions about both the relation between individuals and nature, and individuals and social institutions.

Meanwhile, not too far from ancient Greece, the Hebrews developed a literary form which is now part of the Hebrew Bible, the various books of the Prophets. Eventually, prophecy, as a literary form, took root in America during the seventeenth century when the Puritans, who envisioned themselves to be the new Israelites creating a New Jerusalem in a new England, saw it as their mission to write a new Bible for a new Canaan. In the works of their new bible the Puritans developed a literary form, the jeremiad, modeled on the Book of Jeremiah from the Hebrew Bible. As the literary scholar Sargent Bush explains "the jeremiad" is "a sermon form that served both to admonish and to encourage."



Of the many poets of his generation born in the first decades of the twentieth century, Kunitz was in an ideal position to blend the Hebrew, Puritan jeremiad with the classical Greek and Roman pastoral. Born into a Jewish family in New England, he grew up with the Hebrew Bible and the Prophets as well as with the Puritan inflected literature of New England. Born and educated in Massachusetts, and a student of literature both undergraduate and graduate at Harvard, he expected to teach at Harvard as well. But after achieving his master's degree in 1927, he was told, in his words, "that Anglo-Saxons would resent being taught English by a Jew, even a Jew with a *summa cum laude*." Despite this setback, he went on to edit at least seventeen reference books on literature that were standard material on the subject throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. In effect, he was as knowledgeable about the western pastoral and classical tradition as any poet of his generation.

What makes the poem, "The War Against the Trees," so exciting, unusual and interesting, then, is the way it blends the pastoral tradition of the classical age with the jeremiad, the New England version of the Hebrew Prophets. This blending of poetic types produces a work of unusual and striking force. Part of this force is due to the variations on these forms that Kunitz makes. For example, rather than taking place among shepherds in a pasture, the poem occurs in a settled town. But the pastoral structure is retained because the poem is an address to nature, in this case a group of elm trees that are so ancient they literally have witnessed the events of a century. The ethical, social aspect of Kunitz's modern pastoral is that these modern shepherds, neighbors in a small town, must consider the consequences and meaning of ripping these trees out of the soil. To destroy something so old, is it not a kind of betrayal of one's own roots? One's own past?

To ask that question, however, is to engage not only a pastoral convention but also a convention far more common to the Puritan jeremiad. When Kunitz laments the "war against the trees" he does not just set a series of questions about the proper relationship to nature in motion, he also begins an angry, admonishing, even scolding jeremiad of his own. The pastoral scene becomes, in effect, a platform for Kunitz's own prophecy of a hopeless, even catastrophic future.

What is that future? What is the transgression Kunitz means to have us notice? It is the new rise of suburbs. The post-World War II phenomenon of the suburb made possible by a new automobile culture was quite literally changing the very idea of the landscape all over America. In his poem, Kunitz renders this transformation into the language of a visionary war of biblical proportions. In this prophecy, the evil ones are not philistines but suburbanites and the evil god is not Moloch but oil. By contrast, the heroes are the mighty elms, the "giants" who wear "crowns." The suburb, in other words, is more than just an idea about the proper relationship between people and nature. It is, says Kunitz's poem, a profoundly unethical, potentially immoral attitude towards nature itself because it sees nature only as decoration, a mere appendage to commercial life. By contrast, the century old elms give the lie to such a shallow relationship. Ultimately, the poem, in good jeremiad fashion, urges a return to a more symbiotic relationship with nature. It condemns the suburban transformation as an unholy model of dominance where nature is merely so much land to develop for cash.



Kunitz's attack on the suburb implies that the small town is a kind of American pastoral. This idea asserts itself most strongly at the poem's conclusion when he connects the elms to the town's own historical sense of itself. To destroy the elms in the name of suburbanization, he says, is to destroy one's own history. The jeremiad is meant to be a warning to the town: Kunitz all but says that to sell its land to an oil company is to sell its soul, its past, its roots. This warning has an angry edge to it because, as the poem indicates, this very attack itself will likely have no power or influence in modern American life. Kunitz is aware that nothing will stop suburbanization and it is this pessimism, this anger, that defines the poem's tone. Kunitz's angry critique of a society that has given up any respect or interest in the integrity of nature becomes the ethical, and social heart and soul of the poem.

Turning now to the poem itself, one discovers that it depends on a strict sense of form. In five, six line, metrical stanzas it develops its story through the use of symbolism, metaphor, complex imagery, and literary allusion. Every stanza also contains at least one pair of rhymes. It is as if Kunitz, by appealing to form in this way, were saying, through the use of this formal style, that some traditions must not be lost, must be preserved. Although his subject is modern, the selling of land and the bulldozing of trees, the structure is ancient (pastoral and jeremiad), and the form (meter and rhyme) is, if not ancient, at least several centuries old. Both the forms and structure of this poem make it traditional, dependent on the past, and as ancient and noble as the very trees it means to defend and champion! By contrasting these old forms and styles to a modern subject, in other words, Kunitz highlights his own position; he becomes a man in tune with nature and, as such, he opposes nature's dominance in the name of the modern suburbs.

The first stanza establishes the anecdote, the scene that will drive what follows. Note that in this stanza the war depicted is between machine and nature: people are, in this instance, mere commentators even though they are responsible for the event itself. Ultimately, though, the larger economic system, suburbanization, is the real culprit here: "The man who sold his lawn to standard oil / Joked with his neighbors come to watch the show." Here, the man sells his bit of earth to an oil company. But why shouldn't he? No doubt he made a great deal of money off the sale and can enjoy his new profit by trading a few jokes with his neighbors. Presumably, the scene is a small town somewhere in the United States. But what is "the show"? It is "bulldozers, drunk with gasoline" who "test the virtue of the soil." Here, the gendered imagery makes the case against such a sale plain. The bulldozers become drunken male warriors who test the female virtue of what one famous scholar of American culture called the Virgin Land (Henry Nash Smith). Innocent, female earth, in other words, will be raped by the machines of suburbanization.

The next stanza makes even more plain that the culprit is neither the man who sold the land nor necessarily even the bulldozers. Rather, it shows that suburbanization, the transformation of America from a place of cities, farms, and towns, to a place where the majority of citizens will live in suburbs has begun. This point is made in the opening lines of the second stanza:



Forsythia-forays and hydrangea-raids
Were but the preliminaries to a war
Against the great-grandfathers of the town

In these lines, Kunitz explains that the bulldozers are, in the fact, the last battle, in a much older war against nature. For not only has the earth been raped but even the plants have been transformed as more and more decorative flowers replace the grandfathers, the trees, the real indigenous ecosystem. The typical yard even of the town was but the first "foray" and "raid" against nature that would be concluded when the great-grandfather trees are felled. Kunitz here says that no one ought to be surprised for he, like a prophet, could have predicted upon first seeing the silly hydrangea and forsythia that soon bulldozers would "lop" and "maim" these trees. To emphasize his view that the bulldozers merely conclude a centuries long "war against the trees," the poem's second stanza ends by declaring that, as each elm tree falls, "a century went down."

As he begins his third stanza the poem that began as a pastoral enters into high jeremiad gear. The stanza asks just how important a tree is? What is its value? Mere cash to be cashed in? Or is its value to be measured in terms of its history? Kunitz gives us nature's view of this calamity by turning his gaze to the moles underground who are the panicked first witnesses to this final battle of the war. In so doing, Kunitz suggests that the trees are fundamental to this place, to its ecosystem, to its very identity as a place. They can be said to embody history. This has profound implications for people since it assumes that insofar as one belongs to a particular place the flora and fauna of that place are, as it were, one's relatives. To kill off the trees, then, is to kill off one's own history, a part not only of the town but of one's self as well.

The third stanza's powerful description of the felling of the elms, Kunitz gives us the perspective of the mole "rampaging" through "his halls" as the trees are uprooted. In effect, this third stanza transforms the landscape into a kind of epic battle. The trees, understood as giants, are "forced to their knees," and their citizens, like this mole, flee in terror. That Kunitz sets the poem underground in this stanza indicates, through the metaphor, "underground," just how fundamental these elms are to this place. Words such as "deep" and "roots" are often used as metaphors to indicate a connection to a place. In this poem, real roots actually do run deep and they are with great labor and with mighty machines eradicated nonetheless. In other words, by going underground Kunitz emphasizes the metaphorical, even symbolic meaning of the trees suggesting through the metaphor that they are the very definition of this place's history. To attack them is to attack one's own past.

The reading explains why the next stanza returns to the human realm as a lost place of mere ghosts. It begins, "I saw the ghosts of children at their games / Racing beyond their childhood in the shade." Here, Kunitz connects the trees to the children of this town. He connects the trees to the children's experience and, in so doing, he links the trees both to the town's past (the children) and to its future, since these same children will grow up to run the town itself. The prophetic admonition here is Kunitz's implication



that, by cutting the trees, the town is effectively cutting off its own roots, its own childhood, its own history. The stanza concludes:

And while the green world turned its death-foxed page
And a red wagon wheeled,
I watched them disappear
Into the suburbs of their grievous age.

These lines only increase the prophetic anger of the poem's theme. "The green world" is a traditional poetic figure, a trope, for the pastoral ideal of a bucolic natural pasture of shepherds at home with their flocks. Imagining the passage of time as a book turning its pages, Kunitz tells us that the next page, our present commercial civilization, is "death-foxed." The new postwar suburban age belongs to a "grievous" time when the kings, the elms, will lose their crowns to drunken machines and laughing neighbors. The trees, and the children who knew them, will be nothing but ghosts, forgotten to history.

One could argue that this stanza implies that the suburbs made the bulldozers necessary. The suburbs, we are told, create a mentality, a "grievous age," that disconnects the human from the natural by removing people ever more completely from the great-grandfathers of their past. The poem's concluding stanza, therefore, angrily blasts the world of automobiles. The suburb as a place entirely dependent on cars becomes, in this poem, a final human victory over the great-grandfathers, and over the last gasp of the pastoral ideal, the lost American town. In the first three lines of the last stanza, Kunitz returns to the classical age, specifically to Greek myth, when he says that the trees, with their roots sticking up in the air, look like gorgons, those fantastically ugly women with snakes for hair: one look at a gorgon and one would turn to stone. In Greek mythology Perseus kills Medusa, one of the three gorgon sisters, but, in Kunitz's poem, Perseus is no hero and the Medusa is no monster. Indeed, just as Perseus could only look at the gorgon he was to kill through the mirror of the shield Athena gave him, so the unnamed victor of these gorgons, can only look at them in mirrors as well. Ironically, even sarcastically, the mirror this present day Perseus uses is not a shield granted to the conquering hero by a goddess but rather it is merely "the rear-view mirrors of the passing cars." All those who drive, in other words, are, in part, responsible for the death of these great-grandfathers. The poem, as is true for jeremiads generally, implicates its readers. It says that we, in our blindness and our greed, have transformed our heritage, our history, our own past into modern day gorgons. In the final stanza of this poem, then, Kunitz offers us a portrait of the automobile age: a time of disconnection, loss, the end of the pastoral ideal.

That Kunitz's poem has the force of a prophecy must have struck readers of the book in which it appeared, his third. For it won the Pulitzer Prize for the best book of poetry in 1958. Whatever politicians might have us believe, poets, at any rate, as well as their readers welcome such civilized calls to account for our transgressions.

Source: Jonathan N. Barron, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.



Critical Essay #3

Mowery holds a Ph.D. from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, in Rhetoric and Composition and American Literature. He has written numerous essays for the Gale Group. In the following, Mowery examines the theme of life and death and Kunitz's special use of language.

Kunitz was born in the industrial town of Worcester, Massachusetts in 1905. He was raised by his mother; his father had died before his birth. He was subjected to anti-Semitism as a youth. (Worcester is built on seven hills, each of which was inhabited by a different ethnic group. At that time these groups remained apart and oftentimes were antagonistic to the others.) In an interview with Leslie Kelen he said, "I was curious about the world of possibilities beyond those other alien hills (in Worcester)." Later in another interview he said, "In my youth, as might be expected, I had little knowledge of the world to draw on. But I had fallen in love with language and was excited by ideas." To Leslie Kelen he also remarked, "I'm not a nature poet, but I am a poet of the natural world." Kunitz's five stanza poem reveals his love of nature and shows his fascination with special forms of language in order to present his ideas. The poem takes a look at the modern world's relentless quest for oil at the expense of the environment. In it, the narrator stands to the side and watches and comments on the changes occurring before him.

In *Touch Melt*, published in 1995 in *The Later Poems: New and Selected*, the question is asked, "What makes the engine go?" The answer is: "Desire, desire, desire." It is "desire" for oil-consuming machines that pushes the oil company to seek more sources of oil. A new and "grievous age" makes unquenchable and immediate demands for more oil. The consequence of this desire is that the future has become dependent on oil, just as the past has been. And so to satisfy the future, the present now destroys the past.

Kunitz once said, "I know ... that I am living and dying at once." This acceptance of life and death simultaneously is a major theme in his poetry. In this poem the theme of death in life is reintroduced as the theme of past and future. The future informs the past, just as the past determines the future. In Kunitz's poem the future will destroy the past upon which it will be built. As the bulldozers and other machines test "the virtue of the soil" and remove the greenery, they leave a cratered moon-like world. The forsythia, hydrangeas, and privet hedge all fall to the power of the machines, as one part of the natural world is uprooted and destroyed in order to find another. With the felling of each "great-grandfather" the link between the past and the future is reduced. The ancient trees, representatives of the past, yield to the machines that now bring them "to their knees."

Ironically, this attack on trees is also an attack on the primal origin of oil itself: the prehistoric accumulation of forest material which under pressure and over time is turned into oil. These trees would not be turned into oil, but they are descendants of those trees from ages past. The oil is used by the past-driven machine to destroy the present-



day trees to gain access to more prehistoric oil deposits that will be needed to fuel future machines in their quest for more oil! And the cycle continues without end. In this search for oil the needs of the future destroy two pasts: the oil itself and the memories of the past. The cycle brings to mind the ancient imagery of a snake eating its own tail until nothing exists except the memory of the snake. But in this poem, even the memory disappears.

In the headlong quest for new sources, the oilseeking Standard Oil Company attacks the landscape, laying low everything in its path. This is the environmental equivalent to General Sherman's march to the sea during the American Civil War and it is reported using warlike imagery and phrases. The attack on the "lawn" and the neighborhood soil is as frantic as the children's games. This event brings to mind the phrase often repeated during the Vietnam war: We had to destroy the village, in order to save it. In this poem, the neighborhood is destroyed in order to provide it with the oil it will need in order to survive in the oil-dependant future. The image left on that "corner lot" is one fleeting rearview mirror glimpse, the "witness-moment" of the cratered moonscape (a bombed landscape image) disappearing into the distance.

The ghostly images of playing children soon disappear because those memories depend on the existence of the old trees under which they played their games "in the shade." The children's frantic play, as they go "racing beyond their childhood" into a future of their own, is replaced by the frantic destruction of the gasoline-drunken machines as they charge into their own future. But each enters a different future. The children, who played in the past, enter a future which is the present for the narrator. The bulldozers, which work in the present, move into an unknown future. The narrator stands in the present, examining the past as it moves into the future—a paradox of the past, present and future all occurring at once.

An important poetic construction comes into play in the poem: the use of hyphenated words. In each stanza Kunitz uses a specially crafted word to create new meanings. "Forsythia-forays and hydrangea-raids" in stanza two create new images of plants and flowers with the war being waged on them by the machines. These new words combine the tender innocence of flowering shrubs with the brutality of war. The word "witness-moment" combines the instant of glancing into a rear-view mirror with the intensity of witnessing an event. It is more than just a casual seeing of the event because to witness carries a stronger involvement with it. It means to attest or to affirm an event to be true.

In the fourth stanza, "death-foxed" is Kunitz's manufactured word that combines several meanings into one. An old meaning for "foxed" is intoxicated. Another correlation with the word deathfoxed is the old word death-bird, a carrion eater. The combination of these meanings at this point creates a new meaning: being intoxicated with the death of the "green world" in the recently devoured neighborhood.

The passing moment of defoliation is also witnessed by others. Some see it through the rear-view mirrors of their gasoline consuming cars. In the fleeting "witness-moment" the driver sees the past, literally the scenery behind him, but continues on the road to the



future. In so doing the driver fulfills his part in the course of events according to Picard as the road ahead, his future, soon becomes the road in the mirror, his past.

The red wagon, a non-oil-dependent vehicle, is important to the narrator, because it combines the images of cheerful child's play and the non-oildependent children (as in Kunitz's youth). But these are soon replaced by the oil-powered machines that eat at the greenery of the neighborhood and the automobiles that carry witnesses past it.

The machines wage their impersonal war and bring the tree "giants to their knees." There are no people involved in the attacks. Only machines attack the trees and only the trees suffer from the attack. The implication that the machines have taken over the world in an insatiable attempt to quench their thirst for oil products is conveyed by the narrator's inaction. The humans (the narrator and the watching neighbors) are passive observers. The drivers of passing cars are also detached as they witness the events as a reflected image in a rear-view mirror.

The boldly stated environmental concern addressed in this poem is especially poignant because it was published in 1958 (in *Selected Poems, 1928-1958*), when environmentalism was a littleknown concept. The result of his far-reaching vision is this well-crafted little poem. The "intellectual courage that insists on the truth" as he saw it allowed him to raise the issues in his poem. "If I hadn't had an urgent impulse, if the poem didn't seem to me terribly important," Kunitz said, "I never wanted to write it and didn't." Kunitz grappled with images that have become all too commonplace. But many trees and landscapes have been sacrificed since this poem first appeared. He once revealed in the *New York Times*: "The deepest thing I know is that I am living and dying at once, and my conviction is to report that dialogue. It is a rather terrifying thought that is at the root of much of my poetry." That combination of life and death, as present and past, is at the heart of this poem.

Source: Carl Mowery, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.



Adaptations

The audiocassette tape, *Stanley Kunitz* (1991), introduced by the poet Galway Kinnell, is available from The Academy of American Poets Tapes Program, 584 Broadway, Suite 1208, New York, NY 10012-3250. The Academy of American Poets, <http://www.he.net/susannah/academy.htm>

Stanley Kunitz reads his poems "King of the River" (1970) and "The Quarrel" (1979) on the *The Atlantic Review's* website, Atlantic Unbound, <http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/poetry/antholog/aaindx.htm>

An audiocassette tape of Kunitz, *The Only Dance*, (1981) is available from Watershed Tapes, (Watershed Online), <http://www.watershed.winnipeg.mb.ca/>



Topics for Further Study

Research the history of American environmentalism from 1892 (the beginning of the Sierra Club), to 1962 (the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*). What themes and questions do you see recurring?

Paying special attention to Standard Oil, research the history of the oil industry in the United States during the 1950s. Prepare a report describing who benefitted from the industry's actions, and who suffered.

Gather photos of 1950s suburbia from your parents, friends, and photo books. Sort them according to topics such as "Conformity," "Affluence," "The American Lawn," "Suburban American Architecture," etc. Write an essay investigating the values that these images embody, and compare those values to your own. Are they the same, different?

Investigate the Ozone activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, hanged by the Nigerian government on November 10, 1995, for alleged murders. Saro-Wiwa led the protest against Shell Oil's polluting of Nigerian operations and their support by the Nigerian government. Present your findings to your class.

Compare and Contrast

1958: *The Affluent Society*, by Harvard economics professor John Kenneth Galbraith, decries the overemphasis on consumer goods in the U.S. economy and the use of advertising to create artificial demand for such goods. More of the nation's wealth should be allocated to the public, says Galbraith.

1999: *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need* by Juliet Schor shows how keeping up with the Joneses has evolved from keeping pace with one's neighbors and those in a similar social strata, to keeping up with coworkers who earn five times one's own salary, or television characters with a lifestyle unattainable for the average person.

1958: "The torrent of foreign oil robs Texas of her oil market" and costs the state \$1 million per day, says the chairman of the Texas Railroad Commission which controls production in the state. The Commission reduces Texas oil wells to eight producing days per month.

2000: Truckers march on Washington demanding that the federal government lower oil prices. With American pressure, the organization of oil producing nations, OPEC, agrees to step up oil production in order to lower prices.

1958: The median U.S. family income is \$5,087, up from \$3,187 in 1948 (half of all families have incomes below the median, half above), but prices have climbed along with incomes.

Today: The median family income adjusted for inflation is \$42,000.

What Do I Read Next?

Arguably the most important book of the modern environmental movement, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), won eight awards from conservation and women's groups and became a national bestseller.

Bill McKibben, in *The End of Nature* (1989), wrote about air and weather as Rachel Carson had about soil, plants, and insects in *Silent Spring*, both warning of irreversible damage if humanity keeps up the increasing pace of production and consumption.

Nature is one of the more complex words in the English language. To tackle the history of the transformation of ideas of nature from early Greeks to modern Americans, Clarence Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (1967) is an indispensable resource.

What Clarence Glacken did for the concept of nature in 1967, Max Oelschlaeger did for the concept of wilderness in his *The Idea of Wilderness* (1991). Oelschlaeger's scope extends from prehistory to the age of ecology.

Derek Wall's anthology, *Green History* (1994), covers environmental writings by philosophers, writers, and scientists, including authors from Plato to D. H. Lawrence, Sappho to Leo Tolstoy.



Further Study

Brantley, Robin, "A Touch of the Poet," in *New York Times Magazine*, September 7, 1945, pp. 80-83.

A commentary on and description of Kunitz's gardens at his homes in New York City and Provincetown.

Kunitz, Stanley, "Creative Writing Workshop," in *Education*, Vol. 73, November, 1952, pp. 152-56.

This is a valuable account of the poet's teaching aims and methods.

_____, *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected*, W. W. Norton, 1997.

Kunitz's ninth book of poetry includes works from three collections published since 1971 as well as nine poems written since 1985.

Mercier, Vivian, Review of *Selected Poems*, in *Commonweal*, Vol. 69, February 13, 1959, p. 523.

Mercier comments on the capacity of Kunitz's later poems to speak more directly to readers. She attributes this to the wisdom that comes with age.

Rupp, Rebecca, *Red Oaks and Black Birches*, Storey Communications, 1990.

In this unusual but rewarding book Rupp provides a cultural history of trees, touching on their symbolic as well as their literal importance.



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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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