While I Was Gone a War Began Study Guide

While I Was Gone a War Began by Ana Castillo

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Introduction

On August 7, 1998, Al Qaeda operatives under the direction of Osama Bin Laden bombed two United States embassies in Africa. The truck bombing in Nairobi, Kenya, killed 213 people, injured approximately 4,000, and severely damaged the embassy. The other bombing, in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, killed twelve people and injured eighty-five others. Upon hearing about these bombings, Ana Castillo wrote the poem "While I Was Gone a War Began," and she notes in *I Ask the Impossible* (2001), the collection in which the poem appears, that the poem was originally written in 1998 in Chicago. The poem is thus a reaction to a specific (albeit unnamed within the poem) incident, but it addresses the violent state of the world in general.

Although Al Qaeda terrorist attacks against the United States have been numerous, the embassy bombings were the most notable until the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. The title of Castillo's poem, therefore, seems prophetic. The war against America had indeed begun, but the majority of the public did not realize it until the New York City and Washington, DC attacks on that date.

"While I Was Gone a War Began" is set in a vineyard and in Rome, Italy. The message of the poem seems to be that everyone is affected by world events, and everyone must do his part to improve the world in whatever way his talents enable him. The poem also questions the effectiveness of literature in combating social injustice and expresses frustration with the public's acceptance of violence as a norm in everyday life.

Author Biography

Born to Raymond and Raquel Rocha Castillo on June 15, 1953, Ana Castillo grew up speaking Spanish in a working-class Italian neighborhood in Chicago, where she first encountered the prejudice that led her to become active in the Chicano and feminist movements. She feels, however, that the urban environment was beneficial in that it exposed her to a range of cultures, beliefs, and customs. Her parents were great storytellers, but they took the practical road of sending their daughter to a secretarial high school. However, Castillo's lack of interest and poor typing skills led her to pursue higher education at Chicago City College and then Northern Illinois University. At first she studied art but was so discouraged by teachers who failed to understand her cultural and feminine perspective that she turned to writing for personal expression and finished with a bachelor's degree in liberal arts in 1975. Supporting herself by serving as a college lecturer and a writer-in-residence for the Illinois Arts Council, Castillo then worked toward her master's degree in Latin American and Caribbean studies at the University of Chicago and graduated in 1979. The years that followed were filled with a variety of short-term college teaching positions. In 1991, Castillo was granted a doctorate in American studies from the University of Bremen in Germany.

Castillo has said she never thought of writing as a way to make a living. Her topics have been such that she also did not expect to be noticed by the mainstream. Nevertheless, by the mid-1990s Castillo had won several prestigious awards and was able to become a full-time writer. Although Castillo started out as a poet, she has also written novels and short stories with themes that mirror her poetry: social consciousness, feminism, and life as a Chicana. Among her awards are two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships (1990 and 1995), and the Carl Sandburg Literary Award in 1993 for her novel *So Far from God* (1993). Other acclaimed works are *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986); *Peel My Love like an Onion* (1999); *My Father Was a Toltec and Selected Poems 1973—1988* (1995; originally published as *My Father Was a Toltec: Poems* in 1988); *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (1994), a collection of essays; and *Loverboys* (1996), a collection of stories. In addition, Castillo's work appears in numerous anthologies, and she has published various articles. In April 2000, Castillo and other notable Chicagoans were depicted on a historical mural on the sky deck of the Sears Tower.

In 2001, Castillo published her fifth volume of poetry, *I Ask the Impossible*, which contains work written over the previous eleven years. Intended to express topics relevant to women, particularly poor or minority women, the poems are about death, social protest, love, and family relationships. Among the poems is "While I Was Gone a War Began," as well as several poems that focus on the childhood of Castillo's son, Marcel Ramon Herrera. The public can read about her activities at her Website: http://www.anacastillo.com.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

In the first line, the narrator states that while she "was gone a war began," but she does not divulge in this first stanza where she has been or where the war is. She notes that she is in Rome and that she has been seeking translations of daily news reports from her friends. The narrator feels as if she has heard the story before, perhaps in a movie or an advertisement. The scenes of war on television must appear like movies or commercials; they have been seen before so many times, but this time they are for real and the speaker is in disbelief.

Stanza 2

The narrator questions whether she has seen these images before in an underground cartoon, or perhaps in an old John Wayne film. John Wayne stands for the ideal American defender. Castillo may have chosen the phrase "sinister sheikh" because it is a stereotypical image that Americans have of Arab terrorists. Consequently, the "sinister sheikh versus John Wayne" is the classic bad guy versus good guy.

Turning then to a biblical reference, the narrator brings to mind the disasters recorded in the Book of Revelation. Comparing herself to a nonbeliever remembering Sunday school as just a bunch of stories and not true recordings or predictions, she wonders why people bother with such fiction when real life is much scarier. The fiction seems scarier than anything we can imagine from our comfortable little worlds, but it is not. For centuries, the apocalyptic events in Revelation have been considered the worst possible disasters. The narrator lists a number of such catastrophes that have already happened around the world, repeatedly and at the same time, and is at a loss to explain the continued existence of fiction. Reality is enough.

Stanza 3

In this stanza, the narrator discusses conflicts that have erupted around the world. The narrator mentions the Congo, Ireland, and Mexico, because in 1998 rebel forces took over large sections of the Congo from its relatively new ruler; the Good Friday Agreement in Ireland that was expected to bring long-sought peace to the country was met with continued violence by the IRA; and in the impoverished state of Chiapas, Mexico, Zapatista rebels and the Mexican Army continued to clash. The narrator suggests that the rate of conflict is such that in these parts of the world and presumably elsewhere humans may soon destroy everything and everyone. The line "It's only a speculation, of course" is a sarcastic touch added, possibly, for all the people who respond cynically to such a prediction.

Stanza 4

This long stanza is a conversation between the narrator and a person she calls "an Italian dissident." The dissident angrily asks her what good the great writers have done in terms of saving lives and feeding the hungry. He mocks her by asking what protection an American passport gives her "when your American plane blows up?" in a possible reference to the bombing of Pan Am flight 203 over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988. He asks these questions, says the narrator, "as if / this new war were my personal charge." Considering Castillo's message in this poem that each person has to make a contribution to the world, perhaps she uses the word "personal" intentionally to indicate that the war is indeed her personal charge because every individual must take responsibility for what goes on in the world.

The dissident mentions that African refugees in Italy now selling trinkets would not hesitate to kill their enemy again if given the chance. The dissident asks if the African is the bad guy or the ones who drives him out of his country. He questions "Who is the last racist?" in a chain of racists, if the white colonialists killed blacks, but blacks now kill each other. And who exhibits the worst colonial behavior, the Mexican authority brutalizing the indigents or the white rancher taking advantage of the Mexican illegal immigrants?

The stanza concludes with the dissident saying he hopes that for both their sakes the narrator's pen will be mightier than the sword in its effectiveness at combating the world's problems. He says that he is not a writer or a father, but he still gives his life for a good cause until he no longer has the energy or will to care anymore. The description of the dissident as a smoker with yellowed teeth makes him more real in the reader's mind.

Stanza 5

The dissident's angry comments leave the narrator speechless at the realization of the possible futility of her words. She also may feel chastised for using words when he had just told her they do no good. The narrator and the dissident drink wine in silence and trap "a rat getting into the vat." She reveals that she and the dissident are at the vineyard that belonged to the dissident's late father. They watch the sun set together. These common actions are placed in the poem to indicate that life goes on. We have to keep living, so we eat and drink. We act as if there will be a future by preserving a vat from getting contaminated. Castillo's use of the word "another" in describing the red sunset reminds the reader that there have been many sunsets before and, most likely, there will be many more to come. At the end of the poem, the narrator returns to the world where the press is more concerned with "sordid scandal" than with reporting on the world's anguish, when in fact "surprise bombing over any city at night" is the worst scandal of all. "Any" and every bombing should be considered a violent assault on us all because, ultimately, we are all affected in some way or another. Such incidents are not

someone else's problem, but a horror that should disturb us into action to preserve the "sanctity of the night."

Themes

War

The theme of war is obvious in this poem since the word "war" is in its title. First the narrator hears the news of the war, and then she describes her reaction. She names countries where violence is threatening to destroy the people entirely, and she gives examples of the universality of hatred and power struggles. After speculating about the value of literature in a war-torn world, she also points out how people have become so used to wars that they have perhaps accepted the violence as normal and turned their attention to more trivial matters.

Role of Literature

The Italian dissident in the poem asks, "What good have all the great writers done? . . . What good your poems, / your good intentions, / your thoughts and words." These questions have probably been asked for centuries, yet we know that every great civilization has had a body of literature and that poets, dramatists, and other storytellers have existed for thousands of years. The Greek tragedies show us that literature has more purpose than a pleasant way to pass the time; literature can be used as a vehicle for change. It can have the impact of Thomas Paine's essays that helped start a revolution. Literature can teach, advise, console, enlighten, and incite. Literature can help us to reflect upon the past and to envision the future. Literature can have a message of such impact that "poems become missiles," as the dissident hopes in "While I Was Gone a War Began." Consequently, writers keep writing with the mission of proving that the pen is mightier than the sword and that the role of literature is vitally important to the question of whether civilization thrives or fails.

Fiction versus Reality

Perhaps it is a human defense mechanism to confuse fiction and reality. When the narrator of this poem hears the news about a war starting, she is not sure that the story she is hearing is real. "It seems I saw this story / in a Hollywood movie, / or on a Taco Bell commercial." The narrator is trying to point out that life in the modern world of television, movies, and other media has blurred the lines between reality and fiction and has deadened the reaction to real disaster by making people feel as if it is not real people who are suffering and dying.

The narrator in the poem goes on to question why people even bother with fiction when reality is always so much more amazing, "after flood and rains, / drought and despair, / abrupt invasions, / disease and famine everywhere." She mentions Revelation, which lists multiple catastrophes that will befall the earth just before the end of the world. The narrator is questioning why the gospel writer describes such terrors as a one-time event when such tribulations happen every day. How will people recognize Armageddon when

such calamity is nothing new? The inference is that the horrors of reality can never be matched, and certainly not surpassed, by the inadequate imaginations of writers.

Apathy

The Italian dissident in the poem declares "and now, I don't care." After a lifetime of fighting for his cause, he probably still cares or else he would not complain to the narrator, but he probably feels as though he has given all he can and nothing has changed. In contrast, the people who are not "scandalized by surprise bombings" may not ever have cared. They may not want to put any effort into making the world a better place as long as their own little patch of the earth is reasonably comfortable. Why care about who is bombing whom on the other side of the world? But Castillo says a bombing over *any* city should be considered scandalous because it violates the "sanctity of night"□that is, the sanctity of peace and peace of mind. It is an old message: we are all members of the human family and what happens to one of us happens to all of us. However, not all people believe or understand this concept and that causes the narrator's sorrow at the end of "While I Was Gone a War Began."

Style

Free Verse

Free verse is the most popular poetic form used by twentieth and early twenty-first century poets, and it is the form Castillo uses in writing "While I Was Gone a War Began." Walt Whitman was perhaps the first poet to use this form, and it was quite a shock to readers in 1855 who were used to poems with strict metrical and rhyme patterns (for example, sonnets). Free verse avoids patterns and fixed line lengths. In fact, free verse varies line length to aid in achieving a desired impact. Rhythm and sound patterns are created by the use of assonance, alliteration, internal rhyme, and the like. Rhythm is also created within lines by designing phrases of about equal length and by repeating phrases that have the same syntactical structure. The result is a cadence similar to the balance of phrases in a musical composition. Castillo uses this cadence device in "While I Was Gone a War Began" when she makes her lists of places where she may have seen "this story" before (a Hollywood movie, a Taco Bell commercial, etc.) and of catastrophes (flood, drought, disease, etc.). The repetition of the "what" and the "who" questions in the fourth stanza also establish a connection and a cadence that unites the poem. The same effect is achieved in the last stanza with the repetition of "we" at the beginning of sentences. With the successful use of these free verse techniques, Castillo shows herself to be a skilled poet.

Narrative or Lyric Poetry

Lyric or narrative poems have characters, plot, setting, and a point of view similar to prose. They are not quite stories chopped into shorter lines, but they do have a story of sorts, a setting of time and place, a specific point of view, and characters dramatizing the message. Such is the case with Castillo's "While I Was Gone a War Began." The main character is the speaker in the poem, just as Castillo's narrator is the "I" in "While I Was Gone a War Began." The speaker may be the poet or a fictional character and may be speaking to another character, perhaps in a dialogue. Castillo has a second character in this poem, the Italian dissident. Their exchange about the value of literature expresses the frustration of the writer. Often, however, the speaker in a narrative poem is a lone character speaking about a personal concern.

Imagery

Imagery refers not only to the descriptive passages of a poem, but also to an appeal to the senses. The dominant sense in "While I Was Gone a War Began" is the visual sense, as seen through the mind's eye. Multiple "pictures" fill the poem: Hollywood, Taco Bell, sunglasses, summer wear, a sheikh, John Wayne, Sunday school, a flood, rains, a drought, a blue passport, a plane, a poor African selling trinkets, a Mexican official, a Mexican Indian, a white rancher, a Mexican worker, a vineyard, a vat, a rat, a

red sunset over fields, and a city being bombed. Most of these are used for the purpose of comparison, but also to set the scene and to bring to mind instances of injustice that the reader knows.

Historical Context

In *I Ask the Impossible*, each of the poems is followed by a date and place indicating when the poem was written and in which city. Consequently, the reader immediately knows that "While I Was Gone a War Began" was written in 1998 in Chicago. The year 1998 was full of many noteworthy events. Castillo has revealed that she wrote this poem specifically in reaction to the August 7 bombings by Al Qaeda terrorists at two U.S. embassies in Africa. It was these bombings that first brought international notoriety to Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. In response, the FBI put Bin Laden on its most-wanted list, and President Clinton, on August 20, ordered cruise missile strikes on a pharmaceutical plant in the Sudan, which was suspected of producing materials for chemical weapons. He also ordered an attack on an Al Qaeda camp in Afghanistan.

Although the specific event that inspired Castillo to write "While I Was Gone a War Began" is not mentioned in the poem, she does refer to three other hot spots in the world: the Congo, Ireland, and Mexico. In May 1997 the long-time and highly corrupt Congo ruler, Mobutu Sese Seko, was overthrown. His replacement, Laurent Kabila, soon proved to be not much better, so in August 1998 rebel forces began attacking Kabila's army and managed to take control of large portions of the country. Since this situation occurred in the same month as the embassy bombings, it was natural for Castillo to list the Congo when she declared in the poem that "continents exploded" during the time that she was gone.

Castillo also names Ireland as an explosive place. This may seem a strange choice since it was in April 1998 that the Good Friday Agreement was reached whereby the Protestants of Northern Ireland agreed to share power with the Catholics, and they gave the Republic of Ireland a voice in Northern Ireland affairs. However, it took a few years for the parties involved to follow through on the agreement and, in the meantime, the IRA, the radical opposition in Northern Ireland held responsible for multiple terrorist activities, refused to disarm. Thus, the violence continued even after the agreement was signed, and that is probably the reason Castillo mentions Ireland.

In Mexico, the third of Castillo's referenced countries, the conflict between the Mexican army and the Zapatistas escalated in June 1998. The Zapatistas are a group of mostly indigenous Mayan rebels who organized in 1994 in opposition to the Mexican government's treatment of indigenous people in the state of Chiapas. Although an agreement in 1995 gave the Mayans the right to govern themselves in autonomous communities within Mexico, the agreement was never really honored. Instead, the government built up military installations in Chiapas. In 1997, army raids into Zapatista communities resulted in multiple deaths and imprisonments. Then, in June 1998 two more massacres occurred. It is probably this terrible incident to which Castillo refers in the poem. After 1998, international support and massive demonstrations forced the Mexican government to meet some of the demands of the Zapatistas, but the situation was still not totally resolved and unrest continued.

Critical Overview

Ana Castillo enjoys a favorable reputation among critics writing for a number of prestigious publications. In an article for *MELUS*, Elsa Saeta depicts Castillo as "One of the most articulate, powerful voices in contemporary Chicana literature . . . whose work has long questioned, subverted, and challenged the status quo." Janet Jones Hampton writes in an article for *Americas*, "Her poems, like her prose, recount the struggles and survival skills of marginalized peoples and sing of their dreams and hopes." Marjorie Agosin in *MultiCultural Review* praises Castillo as "lyrical and passionate" and "one of the country's most provocative and original writers."

In a critique specific to *I Ask the Impossible*, Donna Seaman in *Booklist* says Castillo's poems are "alight with stubborn love, crackling wit, and towering anger." A *Publishers Weekly* critic says of *I Ask the Impossible* that the point of Castillo's poetry is the "immediacy and the message" and that readers can bask in her "experiences and longings or get angry and motivated by her cries for justice." A review of *I Ask the Impossible* appearing in *Library Journal*, written by Lawrence Olszewski, calls Castillo "one of the most outstanding Chicanas writing today"; however, Olszewski feels the social-protest poems in this collection, which would include "While I Was Gone a War Began," are "the weakest and most routine of the lot."

Critic Norma Alarcon, in a chapter on Castillo for a collection of criticism called *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writing and Critical Readings*, remarks on Castillo's expert use of irony as a trademark element in her poetry. Irony is also mentioned in a *Publishers Weekly* interview Samuel Baker conducted with Castillo. Baker describes Castillo as "one of the most prominent Latina writers in the U.S.," adding that "she couches passion for life and work in gentle ironies." There is little doubt that Castillo is considered an important and influential American writer of feminist, Chicana, and protest literature.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kerschen is a freelance writer and part-time English instructor. In this essay, Kerschen explores the life experiences and political activism that led Castillo to writing and that are the background to "While I Was Gone a War Began."

"While I Was Gone a War Began" is a narrative or lyric poem, a type of poem that is noted for having a lone character speaking about a personal concern. This definition truly fits Ana Castillo's poem about war and other violence because she wrote the poem as a social activist in reaction to disturbing world events. Poetry is considered an ideal medium for protest because the structure of a poem requires that strong emotions be stripped to their barest expression. In "While I Was Gone a War Began" Castillo certainly achieves the expression of strong emotions and manages to tie together a number of issues in a short amount of space, including the relevance of her life as a writer.

It was almost inevitable that Ana Castillo would grow up to put a Chicana imprint on feminist and political causes. She was born in 1953, right at the beginning of a time in America when people began to rise up to claim their civil rights and question many social institutions. The Korean War was just ending, but social problems in the United States were stirring up the winds of dissent. During the summer of Castillo's birth in Chicago, there was a huge race riot in protest of integrated housing there. That same year, President Eisenhower authorized "Operation Wetback," which directed the Immigration Service to arrest and deport over 3.8 million Chicanos over the next five years. The use of the derisive term "wetback" in the name of the project indicates the extent of prejudice and discrimination directed at Mexican Americans at the time. This oppression is still evidenced in the relationship of the "gringo ranchero over the Mexican illegal" that Castillo mentions in the poem. As a Chicana activist, Castillo is very aware of the way that border ranchers take advantage of illegal immigrants from Mexico, using their status as a threat to enforce subjugation and exploitation.

When Castillo was a child, hers was the only Mexican family in an Italian neighborhood. Their Italian landlord would not allow them to use the front door and insisted that Castillo's mother scrub the front-entry stairs on her knees every Saturday morning as a condition of their lease. As Castillo later wrote in "A Chicana from Chicago" in *Essence*, she grew up with a "strange sense of ongoing vigilance and repression." Those circumstances made an indelible impression. From then on, being a member of a minority of color, being a member of a Hispanic culture, and being female defined her life and determined her mission in life as a writer.

As Castillo entered her teenage years, the situation for Chicanos was such that life was a struggle and social opportunities were limited. She remembers being subjected to police harassment because of being a Chicana. Considering the conditions Castillo experienced in Chicago, it is no wonder that the Mexican American communities in the Midwest agitated for change and joined the Chicano Civil Rights movement, even though their issues were different from those in the Southwest, where the movement

was made famous. At the same time, the civil rights demonstrations by African Americans were grabbing the headlines. In her article for *Essence*, Castillo comments:

I am very familiar with police-state mentality. I was a minor when I witnessed the riots after the Martin Luther King Jr. assassination [1968] and saw the city go up in flames from my back porch. I remember the national guard marching into my neighborhood shopping center.

Castillo's memories of harassment, racial hatred, and a police state bring to mind the third stanza of "While I Was Gone a War Began," where the question is asked "Who is the last racist?" and references are made to the tyranny of colonial rule. The latter is illustrated in the poem by "the Mexican official over the Indian," a reference to the Mexican government treatment of the indigenous people in the state of Chiapas that has led to the Zapatista rebellion.

At the opening of "While I Was Gone a War Began," the narrator says, "Every day I asked friends in Rome / to translate the news." Even while away, apparently on a vacation, the narrator must know the news, indicating an intense interest in world affairs. This interest has resulted in an extensive knowledge about the world's hot spots as indicted in the poem's references to the troubles in the Congo, Ireland, and Mexico. These references are expanded by the detail given to the "poor African selling trinkets in Italy." This African could be a refugee from the civil strife in the Congo or any of a number of conflicts that have driven Africans from their homelands, yet holding onto the tribal hatreds that cause them to "not hesitate to kill other blacks." For an activist such as Castillo, news is the daily motivation to keep working to solve the world's problems.

News is also an avenue for discovering others with whom one can identify. Just after high school, when Castillo was particularly searching for sisters in the cause, she read *As Tres Marias*, a book by three Portuguese women who broached issues affecting Latina women and for doing so were being censored and were in prison. As Castillo told Janet Jones Hampton in an interview for *Americas*, "That was a fundamental book for me that initiated my writing because it brought it all together for me." Castillo decided right then that she could also "bring all of that together in writing."

In college, Castillo (quoted in "Ana Castillo Painter of Palabras") says, the "negative social attitudes toward people of humble origins, as well as the institutional racism and sexism of the university discouraged me." This increasing awareness of the oppression subjugating her as a woman and a Mexican American led her to writing as a means of expressing her outrage. Her voracious reading of Latin American authors led her naturally to become a Chicana protest poet advocating that the image of American society should be multicultural and not just Anglo-American and decrying the economic inequality of Chicanos. In the process, Castillo has introduced "Xicanisma," a specifically Mexican American brand of feminism. In an interview with Elsa Saeta in *MELUS*, Castillo said that, in the literature of women, we have had a void in the representation of women "who look and think and feel like me and who have had similar experiences in society. I wanted to fill that void."

As part of the protest movement in the mid-1970s, Castillo learned that working toward social change meant making your own individual contribution of talent. For Castillo, that meant taking up the pen. In "While I Was Gone a War Began," she says "I had nothing to give but a few words." Samuel Baker reports in *Publishers Weekly* that Castillo has said, "I was a Chicana protest poet, a complete renegade□and I continue to write that way." She has remarked that she wants her writing to engage the reader in a discussion of issues. A collection of Castillo's poetry written from 1973 to 1988 called *My Father Was a Toltec and Selected Poems, 1973—1988* demonstrates, sometimes in matter-of-fact statements, a political vision that has broadened and become more complicated as her career has progressed. Although Castillo is very much concerned with expressing herself as a feminist and Chicana, she seems to have come back in recent works to political subjects as well. *I Ask the Impossible* is proof of that. Once again with this poem, she is pointing out the struggles of victimized people. As previously mentioned, the third stanza gives examples of this struggle in the descriptions of the "poor African selling trinkets in Italy," "the Mexican official over the Indian," and "the gringo ranchero over the Mexican illegal." The Italian dissident with whom she has the conversation in the poem is also an example of one who struggles against injustice in that he is described as a dissident and says "I gave my life" for whatever was his cause.

In the same moment, the dissident says, "and now, I don't care." In the Saeta interview, Castillo emphasizes, "Refusing to participate is a political act" too, because not participating means that you have joined the mainstream or status quo. Thus, in this poem, Castillo presents both the act of involvement in the person of the narrator poet whose poems may have "become missiles" and the act of non-involvement as represented by the Italian dissident who no longer cares. However, it is also in this poem that she questions the value of a writer in solving these problems and expresses the frustration in trying:

What good have all the great writers done? . . .

What good your poems,

your good intentions,

your thoughts and words

all for the common good?

What lives have they saved?

What mouths do they feed?

As a young woman, Castillo had trouble finding books by U.S. Latinas because Latina writers could not get published. Now, writers of all cultures and colors are being published. Some of the credit for this change can be given to Castillo who not only has written what needed to be said, but also has fought for the right to be heard. Her writings are a voice arising from her Chicana experience, but poems such as "While I Was Gone a War Began" have a universal message as well. Castillo's commitment to

universal peace and justice can also be seen outside her literary works. She has written commentary in a number of articles, and she has served on the American Booksellers Association panel for Social Responsibility. As of 2004, the front page of her Website was focused on links to activist sites, to calls for action in some protest or political movement.

In the introduction to her collection of poetry *I Ask the Impossible*, Castillo says, "When I started taking writing in verse seriously nearly three decades ago, I wrote as a witness to my generation. . . . I hope that my poems still serve as testimony to the times." "While I Was Gone a War Began" is definitely a testimony to the early twenty-first century in its reaction to a violent deed, in its listing of hot spots in the world, in its questioning of the racism and oppression that continue around the globe. It also expresses a frustration with the seeming futility of efforts to better the human condition. In the opening of the fourth stanza of the poem, the narrator decides to keep her words to herself because of "their apparent uselessness." However, the despair expressed in this poem is atypical of Castillo's attitude. It is perhaps more of a barb at the apathy of others. The fact that the poem exists and was published is evidence that Castillo's political and social conscience continued its commitment to stay in the fray and fight the good fight, one poem at a time.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on "While I Was Gone a War Began," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

One of Ana Castillo's influences has been Columbian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1982. Research the life and works of Garcia Marquez and comment on the impact he has had on Latin American and world literature.

Another influence on Castillo is the "magical realism" movement made famous by a number of prominent Latin American writers. Describe magical realism and name some of the members of the movement from South America.

Castillo is considered one of the best writers in Chicana literature. What is Chicana literature? What are its distinguishing features? In what time period has this literature been written?

"While I Was Gone a War Began" is a poem about the violence in our world. Elsewhere in *I Ask the Impossible*, Castillo makes mention of Sister Dianna Ortiz, Anna Mae Aquash, and Comandante Ramona. Who are these women and what is their connection to violence in world affairs?

It is often mentioned that Castillo participated in the Chicano Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. What was this movement and how did it differ from that of African Americans?

What Do I Read Next?

Women Are Not Roses (1984) is Castillo's third book of poetry. In it she explores the idea of women who feel disenfranchised in male-dominated cultures.

The Mixquiahuala Letters (1986), Castillo's first novel, earned her an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. As the title indicates, the novel is composed of a series of letters, written in the 1970s and 1980s, between Teresa, a California poet, and Alicia, her college friend who has become an artist in New York City. The correspondence reveals how the roles these women have assumed differ from the traditional roles of Latina women and how the men in Teresa's and Alicia's lives□both Anglo and Chicano□resent this difference.

In 1993 Castillo published *So Far from God*, a novel that garnered more public interest than any of her previous works. Written in the genre of magical realism, the story follows the life of a Latina woman and her four vastly different daughters. This book received the Carl Sandburg Literary Award.

Castillo's first short-story collection was published as *Loverboys* (1996). Quirky characters, strong-willed women, and multiple variations of love and friendship fill these stories and reveal Castillo's talent for inventiveness, humor, and eroticism.

Peel My Love like an Onion (1999) is a novel about a flamenco dancer who overcomes many challenges but is unlucky in love and life. This book exhibits Castillo's feminism at a new depth.

Gabriel García Márquez is one of the Latin American authors who has influenced Ana Castillo. His book *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is world renowned and is considered one of the most influential novels of the twentieth century. It was republished in 2003.

MultiAmerica: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace (1997), edited by Ishmael Reed, is an anthology that includes essays by Castillo, Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka, Frank Chin, Bharati Mukherhjee, Barbara Smith, and Miguel Algarin, among others.

Further Study

Anzaldúa, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2d ed., Aunt Lute, 1999.

First published in 1987, *Borderlands* has become a classic in Chicano border studies, feminist theory, gay and lesbian studies, and cultural studies.

Edgerton, Robert, *The Troubled Heart of Africa: A History of the Congo*, St. Martin's Press, 2002.

Edgerton provides a thorough history of the Congo from the sixteenth century up through 2001, with a sensitive description of the land, its rich resources, and the many political struggles of its people.

Hayden, Tom, ed., *The Zapatista Reader*, Nation Books, 2001.

An anthology of essays, interviews, articles, and letters, this book contains some of the best writing about the Zapatista peasant rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico.

McKittrick, David, and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland*, New Amsterdam Books, 2002.

An overview of the sectarian strife in Northern Ireland since the 1960s, this book gives a balanced presentation of the people and the issues involved.

Moya, Paula, *Learning from Experience: Minority Identitites, Multicultural Struggles*, University of California Press, 2002.

This book discusses Chicana literature and literary criticism, examining ethnic, feminist, and contemporary literary studies.

Sandoval, Chela, and Angela Y. Davis, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

This book describes the different forms of feminist practice employed to bring social justice out of cultural and identity struggles.

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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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