Wild Swans Study Guide

Wild Swans by Edna St. Vincent Millay

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Introduction

In 1921, two volumes of Edna St. Vincent Millay's poetry were published in New York: *A Few Figs from Thistles* and *Second April*. The latter contains many poems about Millay's romantic disappointments and heartbreaks. These poems are sometimes passionate and sometimes subdued, but they are all intensely personal. Scholars often comment that Millay's poetry is feminine in its focus on emotions, but it also breaks from the feminine tradition in its raw honesty. "Wild Swans," which appears in *Second April*, is a good example of this phenomenon. The speaker expresses traditionally feminine feelings of heartache and despair, but she is less traditional in that she is harsh toward her own heart. Although she focuses on her feelings, she seeks a solution to her emotional upheaval by escaping domesticity.

In only eight lines, Millay describes an episode in which the speaker recalls observing the flight of wild swans and then longs for their return. The subject of birds in poetry about human emotion is a long-standing tradition, but Millay uses it in a unique way. In response to seeing the birds, the speaker essentially makes a choice between her "tiresome" heart and the swans, and she chooses the swans. Millay creates a subtle tension in the structure of the poem, which is both measured and spontaneous.

Author Biography

Edna St. Vincent Millay was born in Rockland, Maine, on February 22, 1892. When Millay was eight, her parents divorced, and her mother reared her. Mrs. Millay encouraged the girl's independent spirit and interest in writing. As a result, Millay submitted some of her early poems for publication, and the children's magazine *St. Nicholas* published several of them. Millay first attracted widespread attention, however, at the age of nineteen, when her poem "Renascence" was published. In fact, the success of this poem was a major factor in Millay's earning a scholarship to Vassar College in 1914 after completing a semester at Barnard College.

Upon graduating in 1917, Millay went to live in New York's bohemian Greenwich Village. She lived on limited means, working with a theater troupe and writing poetry. In the free-spirited atmosphere of Greenwich Village, Millay was very open about her relationships with several literary men. During the 1920s, Millay was known as much for her hedonistic lifestyle as for her acclaimed poetry. Both reflected the changing attitudes and rebellion of post-World War I young adults. Despite her independent nature and her deepening cynicism about love relationships, Millay married a businessman and widower named Eugen Jan Boissevain on July 18, 1923.

Millay's first volume of poetry, *Renascence, and Other Poems*, was published in 1917 to critical and popular acclaim. Four years later, two more volumes were published: *A Few Figs from Thistles* and *Second April* (in which "Wild Swans" appeared). *Second April* contains many emotional poems about Millay's brief but intense affair with poet Arthur Davison Ficke. These poems convey despair and cynicism. In 1923, she received the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver*. In the late 1920s, her attention turned toward social and political concerns, an interest that shaped her poetry into the early 1940s. Millay died of cardiac arrest on October 19, 1950, in Austerlitz, New York.

Millay's poetry is unique because she introduces nontraditional themes and subjects within traditional verse forms, most notably the sonnet. Scholars note the dichotomy between the unrestricted content and the disciplined forms Millay often chose. In addition to poetry, Millay wrote plays, essays, translations, and short stories. Critics disagree on Millay's significance among American poets. While some maintain that she was a talented lyricist who failed to live up to the promise she showed early in her career, others argue that her wit, lyrical gift, and mastery of the sonnet place her among the great literary figures of the century.

Poem Text

I looked in my heart while the wild swans went
over.
And what did I see I had not seen before?
Only a question less or a question more;
Nothing to match the flight of wild birds flying.
Tiresome heart, forever living and dying,
House without air, I leave you and lock your door.
Wild swans, come over the town, come over
The town again, trailing your legs and crying!

Plot Summary

"Wild Swans" is the speaker's recollection of watching swans fly overhead. She begins by explaining that seeing the swans made her look into her heart, apparently expecting to find something new. Instead, she merely saw what she had seen before. Any change in her heart was minimal ("Only a question less or a question more") and did not compare to the awesome spectacle of the swans in flight. She perceives the swans as untamed and free; every mention of them includes the word "wild." The swans embody freedom because they are in flight, literally liberated from the earth. The speaker marvels at their sense of direction and purpose, which stands in marked contrast to the uncertainty of her heart.

Lines five and six are introspective and personal, moving from observing the external world to evaluating the internal world. The speaker addresses her heart, calling it "tiresome" and referring to it as a "house without air." The tone is one of exasperation, and it is clear that the speaker longs to be free of her feelings because she has been through emotional turmoil. She decides to free herself by closing her heart and abandoning her emotions ("I leave you and lock your door").

Once she has detached herself from her emotional upheaval, she needs somewhere to go or someone to follow. At this moment, she recalls the swans and beckons them to come again. She is eager for them to return and repeats her plea: "Wild swans, come over the town, come over / The town again, trailing your legs and crying!" The last image reveals that the speaker identifies with the swans and sees herself in them.

Themes

Uncertainty

The speaker responds to the swans largely because they seem to fly with such direction and purpose. This direction contrasts with the speaker's uncertainty and confusion, as evident when she looks into her heart and finds "only a question less or a question more." Her heart has apparently been filled with questions for some time ("And what did I see I had not seen before?"), because she is nonchalant about finding nothing but questions there. She is emotionally uncertain, and she feels lost. In this state, she seeks guidance or reassurance, which is why she reacts to the swans so intensely. She sees in them the confidence and purpose she desires for herself.

That the birds are in flight is very significant to the speaker. She reiterates their action throughout the poem, and in line four, she mentions it twice: "Nothing to match the flight of wild birds flying." The act of flying requires certainty. A bird cannot indulge in uncertainty while in flight because it requires constant effort. All the movements must be perfectly coordinated and directed toward an unwavering purpose. The speaker, however, is standing motionless and looking up at the sky. Standing in one place, she has the potential to go in any direction, but she does not know where to go until the end of the poem, when she calls for the swans to return.

Emotional Exhaustion

The speaker's emotional exhaustion shapes her state of mind in the poem. She has been struggling with her emotions and wants peace so much that when she sees swans in flight, her impulse is to look into her heart. She seems to expect a vision or experience to bring about a change in her that will lead to emotional relief. Upon seeing the swans, however, she finds little change in her heart. It still offers only questions instead of insight or inspiration. She writes that when she looked into her heart, she found, "only a question less or a question more; / Nothing to match the flight of wild birds flying."

Finding no real change in her heart, she rebukes it. She writes, "Tiresome heart, forever living and dying," suggesting that the speaker is at the mercy of her emotions. Her constantly changing emotional state makes her tired and weary. In fact, having her emotions out of control is stifling, and she calls her heart a "House without air." Her exhaustion finally reaches the point at which she detaches herself from her emotions, imagining that her heart is an actual house that she can leave and lock behind her. She makes a decisive move to abandon her emotions and lock them away forever. The final line, however, in which she describes the swans as trailing their legs and crying, demonstrates that she cannot truly be free of her feelings. She sees her trials in the swans who previously represented carefree freedom.

Freedom

The swans represent freedom and liberation. The speaker longs to be carefree and self-directed rather than steered by her emotions. The swans are in flight; they have physically removed themselves from the earth. Symbolically, they are above the cares of the world in their absolute freedom. They can flap their wings and change their surroundings. Because they are animals, they are not subject to the complex and vexing emotional difficulties endured by the speaker. Not only are they animals, but they are wild animals. The swans are untamed and untouched by the concerns of human life. They are physically and emotionally free, making them enviable to the speaker. She finds their freedom so magnificent that nothing, including her deepest pain, compares. She comments that the questions in her heart are "Nothing to match the flight of wild birds flying."

Style

Literary Devices

Although "Wild Swans" is only eight lines, Millay introduces a number of literary devices to add depth to the poem. The swans are symbolic of freedom and certainty; that the speaker describes them as wild emphasizes their totally unfettered existence and their instinctual sense of purpose. Millay employs synecdoche (using a part to represent the whole) by referring to the heart. The heart represents the speaker's entire emotional reality, including feelings past and present. Millay uses personification when she describes the heart as "tiresome." This implies that the heart is a separate entity that exhausts the powerless speaker. Millay also introduces a metaphor of a house to describe the heart. Line six reads, "House without air, I leave you and lock your door." The speaker regards her heart as a stifling house that lacks life-giving air. The metaphor extends as the speaker states that she is leaving the house and locking its door. In the final line, Millay employs anthropomorphism (assigning human characteristics or feelings to nonhuman beings) as she suggests that the swans are crying.

Rhyme Scheme and Meter

Millay creates a subtle tension in the poem's structure. The rhyme scheme, for example (*abbccbac*), does not have a predictable pattern. The first five lines seem to follow a pattern, but the last three lines seem random. Examining the content of those three lines, however, reveals Millay's purpose. In the last three lines, the speaker undergoes a change as she decides to cut herself off from her emotions and seek the liberation enjoyed by the swans. The disrupted rhyme scheme reflects this change.

A similar approach is evident with the meter in the poem. Each of the first two lines has a single iambic foot (one unstressed syllable, one stressed) followed by three anapestic feet (two unstressed syllables, one stressed). The first line has a hanging unstressed syllable at the end, but this is a common poetic feature. Beginning with line three, however, there is no apparent rhythm for the rest of the poem. The rhythm becomes more like that of natural speech. The content of the third line describes the speaker looking into her heart, which contains only uncertainty and turmoil. Logically, this is where measured rhythm would stop, and Millay conveys this by eliminating metrical consistency.

Historical Context

The Roaring Twenties

Victory in World War I and the economic boom that followed it brought about a period of carefree living and a sense of well-being in the United States. America underwent a cultural transformation, having solidly established itself as a major military and economic leader in the world. Advances in technology affected almost every aspect of society, from science to the family kitchen. The construction industry was busy with high demand for residential and commercial buildings, which included hotels, banks, and chain stores. Mass-produced items and improved household appliances made everyday life easier, and increased production of airplanes and automobiles added a decidedly modern aspect to American life.

Expanding industry offered increased work opportunities in cities. As a result, city populations soon surpassed rural populations. While this was good for businesses, it created new social challenges. Population density and diversity brought about conflicts over issues such as religion, prohibition of liquor, race relations, and immigration. Many of these contentious issues carried over into the depressed years of the 1930s.

Although the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution forbade the making, sale, and distribution of liquor, Americans who wanted liquor were able to find it. Organized crime groups ran clubs where people could buy drinks, dance, and listen to music. "Bootleggers" sold liquor to individuals who wanted to drink in their homes or at parties.

Women became more independent in the 1920s. Flappers were women who rejected convention, wore form-fitting dresses, and attended parties where they could drink and smoke. Women in the 1920s began to seek recognition of their abilities and were less likely to shy away from competition with men. As early as 1920, 25 percent of women were working outside the home. In the same year, women won the right to vote when the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified in time for the presidential election that year.

Naturalistic and Symbolistic Period in American Literature

The naturalistic and symbolistic periods are often combined in discussions of American literary periods, but "Wild Swans" fits better with the symbolistic period. The symbolistic period began after World War I as writers' greater awareness of international events influenced their writing. For most writers during this period, this awareness led to an appreciation of European□particularly French□literature. Typical symbolistic writers became cynical of American idealism, and the Lost Generation of writers reacted by temporarily moving to Europe, satirizing American culture, or harking back to what they considered a better time in America's history. Those who moved to Europe became

collectively known as the expatriates, and they included Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, e. e. cummings, and Sherwood Anderson.

The satirists were concentrated in New Haven, Connecticut; Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Greenwich Village in New York City. Although Millay lived in Greenwich Village and knew the work and attitudes of these writers, she was not a satirist. Millay did, however, have fundamental ideas in common with the symbolistic writers. She also sought a new social order and new forms of expression. She was independent and did as she pleased, with little regard for what was traditionally feminine. In her poetry, she disregarded the idea that writing in a new, contemporary style meant leaving everything traditional behind. Instead, Millay forged a new style by introducing new subjects in traditional poetic forms. Critics are particularly impressed with her work in developing the sonnet.

Millay's work also shares some of the naturalistic characteristics. The naturalists believed that biological and environmental forces shape human behavior. They looked to a character's experiences and innate drives to determine what he or she would do in a given situation. In "Wild Swans," the speaker reacts emotionally to a natural occurrence. Her experiences are painful, so she reacts accordingly. Her inborn drive is to escape pain, so she responds to the sight of the swans by longing to join them. It is not an intellectual response or a societal response; it is a personal response that comes from her experience.

Critical Overview

Critics have repeatedly commented on Millay's multifaceted personality as it shaped her poetry. Reviewers regard her as a complex woman whose career blossomed in a unique time for American women. Paula L. Hart of *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 45: American Poets, 1880-1945*, for example, observes that Millay should be "recognized for breaking through the boundaries of conventional subject matter for women writers, while showing the range and the depth of the feminine character." Millay's personal life was part of her mystique as a writer, and her readers and fellow writers were intrigued. Mary M. Colum in the *New Republic* comments on Millay's role as a highprofile nonconformist:

> Her reputation for unconventionality caused her to be discussed by people for whom her poetic expression was not of first interest. It also caused W. B. Yeats, who was not overly impressed by her poetry, and Thomas Hardy, who was, to be excitedly interested in her personality. When Edna Millay first began to be noticed, American women still could not smoke in restaurants or swim in such garb as the European *maillot* . . . [Millay] seemed to be the standard-bearer for the breakdown of futile conventions and of taboos.

Although critics do not always agree on Millay's status among the great American poets, they agree that she was a poet of great vision and ability. Famed poet and critic John Crowe Ransom expresses his mixed reaction to Millay's poetry in the *Southern Review*:

> Miss Millay is an artist of considerable accomplishments. She is the best of the poets who are 'popular' and loved by Circles, Leagues, Lyceums, and Round Tables. . . . She can nearly always be cited for the virtues of clarity, firmness of outline, consistency of tone within the unit poem, and melodiousness. Her career has been one of dignity and poetic sincerity. She is an artist. . . . [Her weakness] is her lack of intellectual interest. . . . The formal, reflective, or 'literary' poems fall for the most part outside [the field of Millay's talent]. She is not a good conventional or formalist poet, and I think I have already suggested why: because she allows the forms to bother her and to push her into absurdities.

Other contemporaries, however, expected Millay to remain an important poet in American literature. Harriet Monroe of *Poetry* comments in a 1924 review:

> Wilful, moody, whimsical, loving, and forgetting, a creature of quick and keen emotions, she has followed her own way and sung her own songs. Taken as a whole, her poems present an utterly feminine personality of singular charm and power; and the best of them, a group of lyrics ineffably lovely, will probably be cherished as the richest, most precious gift of song which any woman since [the ancient Greek poet] Sappho has offered to the world.

In a 1925 essay, Sister Mary Madeleva remarks:

> Today Miss Millay looks important poetically. It may be that we are too near to her. . . . These things can be said for her: . . . she has withstood unguessed temptations to be clever rather than true, and she has reached in a decade a poetic stature half a head above a goodly number of contemporary poets. Her weakness lies in her strength□she is versatile. She adapts herself too easily to the forms and moods of the day. She can be mystical, epigrammatic, flippant, serious, dramatic. She can be neat and sweet and beautiful, and she usually is.

While there is little specific critical commentary on "Wild Swans," critics praise the volume in which it appeared, *Second April*. Most critics characterize the volume as an improvement over her previous work. They find that it shows the poet maturing as a woman and an artist. Hart, for example, writes, "*Second April* showed a more honest approach to the already favorite Millay themes of death, love, and nature." Later in her essay, Hart adds, "Even in the familiar themes, there is a pervading sense of disenchantment in the volume." Although Hart recognizes growing cynicism in *Second April*, Louis Untermeyer of *American Poetry Since 1900* sees elation expressed in a more subdued tone than in Millay's previous work. He explains that

> [*Second April*] recaptures the earlier, concentrated ecstasy. There is little rhetoric here, no mere imitation of prettiness; the too-easy charm to which Miss Millay occasionally descends is replaced by a dignity, almost an austerity of emotion. . . . Hers is a voice that is both intellectually thrilling and emotionally moving.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, Bussey evaluates the ways in which the speaker in Millay's poem projects her feelings and desires onto the swans.

In Millay's "Wild Swans," the speaker recalls being captivated by wild swans flying overhead. She admires them for their beauty, freedom, and sense of purpose, but the reason she has such an intense response to them is that she sees herself in them. Throughout most of the poem, she sees what she wants for herself in the swans, but at the end, she sees herself as she is in them. She projects both her ideal self and her actual self onto the wild birds. Because she sees her ideal self realized in the swans, the speaker finds hope in them. Having failed to find hope anywhere else, the speaker understandably responds intensely to this experience.

The speaker's self-absorption is apparent when, upon seeing swans flying across the sky, her immediate impulse is to look deep within herself. She seems to look into her heart hoping to find that some change or resolution has occurred, but she is disappointed that very little has changed. She seems to expect that swans that happen to fly across the sky will automatically affect her internal self. This is an unusual response to the beauty of nature. Most people observing birds in flight pause to appreciate the birds. Poets have long written about birds, and they usually write about the birds' ability to conquer gravity in flight, produce haunting or uplifting melodies, prey on other animals, or convey emotion. Very often, poets introduce birds as symbols of broad themes such as loneliness, determination, wisdom, or nurturing.

In "Wild Swans," however, the speaker sees swans in flight and is immediately moved to look at herself rather than at the birds. The reader knows that the speaker's response is immediate because the swans are still flying overhead when she looks into her heart, as she relates in the first line: "I looked in my heart while the wild swans went over." This response to the swans lets the reader know from the start that although the poem's title references the swans, and they captivate the speaker, the poem is actually about the speaker.

Millay sets up a contrast between the action of the swans and the inaction of the speaker. This contrast is important to the poem because the poem emphasizes the movement of flying. The inspiration for the opening moment of the poem is the swans' flight; the speaker comments that the uncertainty in her heart is nothing like the swans' flight. At the end, she pleads with the swans to fly over again. The speaker's fixation on flying turns the reader's focus to the image of the birds in flight. The speaker concentrates on this action because it is what she longs for in her own emotional life. She projects onto the swans, flying gracefully and with purpose, her desire to be free and moving forward. In fact, the speaker is so effective at showing the reader the excitement of the swans in flight that the speaker almost forgets to glance downward and see that she herself is motionless. She is the opposite of the swans because she is

anchored to the earth, paralyzed by her emotions, and standing still. She is not moving toward or away from anything and feels so incapable of making a decision that she continues to stand in one place, beckoning the swans to come back to her. The only actions taken by the speaker are internal or passive ones: she looks into her heart, she abandons her tumultuous emotions, and she asks the swans to return.

The last two lines are significant because they indicate that she is prepared to take real action despite the pain and difficulty of doing so. The way Millay conveys this, however, is very subtle. The speaker exclaims, "Wild swans, come over the town, come over / The town again, trailing your legs and crying!" Prior to these lines, the speaker does not perceive the swans as having feelings, but now that she has turned away from her own feelings, she sees the swans crying. Rather than hold onto her hurt, she has cast it onto the swans. This suggests the speaker's willingness to take action because the swans embody action, and she now relates to them on a personal, emotional level. She can now join them because they are like her, and they share her pain. That their legs are trailing indicates the uselessness of their legs to them, just as her own legs seem useless to her. Her inaction in the poem demonstrates that her legs are also trailing. If she can only take flight with the swans, her motionless legs will no longer matter.

The speaker also projects her uncontrolled emotions onto the swans by consistently calling them "wild." Every mention of the swans includes this word, so the swans' wildness is clearly important to the speaker. A typical reader would likely assume that swans are wild, yet the speaker makes a point of emphasizing this. The speaker's emotional state is characterized by uncertainty ("Only a question less or a question more") and turmoil ("Tiresome heart, forever living and dying"). She focuses completely on her emotions, and they are chaotic. Her heart is as untamed as any wild animal; her emotions are not controlled or disciplined by anyone else, just as wild animals are not domesticated nor under the control of an owner. She takes this painful and exasperating turmoil and projects it onto the swans.

The final characteristic the speaker projects onto the swans is the need for purpose and direction. Lines three and four show the contrast between the speaker's uncertainty and confusion and the swans' certainty and resolve. Line three reveals what the speaker finds in her heart, which is what she always finds: "Only a question less or a question more." Line four celebrates the swans' steady movement in a fixed direction: "Nothing to match the flight of wild birds flying." Twice she refers to flight, which to her represents movement with a purpose. The sharp distinction between herself and the swans is evident by her use of the word "nothing," which places a significant gap between the state of her heart and the state of the "wild birds flying." Her complete lack of direction brings her to the conclusion that any plan at all is suitable for her. When she beckons the swans back, she wants to join them in their flight and their purpose. Although she lacks a plan, she projects the necessity of a plan on the swans. As a result, she assumes that their direction is *her* direction. Wherever they are going and whatever they are going to do when they get there is right for her. Whether out of despair or laziness, the speaker latches on to the first creatures she sees that seem to be going somewhere and longs to join their quest. The self-absorption evident in the first line reappears at the end of the poem. To the speaker, the swans are admirable for what they offer her

personally. She sees in them a possible solution to her problems, so she determines that she should join them. There is no mention of what she has to offer them or give back to them, and there is no indication that she will eventually decide to stand on her own.

From start to finish, the speaker reveals herself as being wholly absorbed in her problems: her inability to take action, her emotional chaos, and her lack of direction. Each of these is contrasted to the nature of the swans flying overhead. They represent her current predicament and her deepest desires. Because she has the ability to see her hopes realized in them, and because she longs to see them again, the speaker has the potential to resolve her problems. While she initially looked into her heart and saw no change, by the end of the poem, there has been a major change in her heart. She has opened herself up to hope and action. Rather than wait for peace to find her, she is ready to draw it to her. Still, the last word of the poem is "crying,' and it is in reference to the swans, her harbingers of optimism. This use of anthropomorphism in the last line indicates that ultimately, the speaker cannot run away and escape her feelings. She will have to resolve them before she can truly engage in the world, whether it is the swans' world or her own. While she perceives the world of the swans as one that is liberating, carefree, and light, she realizes at a deeper level that her own world can also be this way.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "Wild Swans," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Wallace is a freelance writer and poet. In this essay, Wallace explores Millays ambivalence about the tension between pure intellect and deep passion.

The tensions are there for everyone: between mind and body, between reason and desire, between the purity of idealism and the complexities of reality. Humanity has always struggled with the push and pull between the animal and the soul which blend in human nature: ascetics have attempted to escape their flesh, and hedonists have tried to extinguish the intellect□both without much success. For writers, especially, the body-spirit division has been a favorite subject, perhaps because writers especially seem to suffer from it□their imagination and intelligence provide them with vivid intellectual visions, but, perhaps also more than others, they are susceptible to very human passions.

For Millay, one of the best-loved and most famously passionate poets of twentieth-century American letters, the tug of war between her body and her soul, her reason and her passion, was a lifelong obsession.

This obsession was partly because, as a woman who came of age in the early part of the twentieth century, she was a member of a generation in which the roles of women, as both intellectual beings and creatures of passion, were in dramatic flux. As Millay came of age in the 1920s, the women's suffrage movement had just won the right for the feminine half of American society to vote, giving women new power and new investment in public life and implicitly placing them on equal footing with men in the intellectual arena. At the same time, the Bohemian arts community in New York City, which Millay became a part of after her graduation from Vassar, was experimenting with ideals of free love, cutting loose the bonds of marital fidelity in which most women had previously expressed themselves as sexual beings. The ideals of intellectual achievement and the possibilities of unbridled passion lay at women's feet.

As daughters of a generation that had not had their opportunities, Millay and her fellow young countrywomen were uniquely aware that their choices could not be made without danger. In a world in which men still ruled almost every major institution, a woman who chose to achieve in intellectual spheres ran a strong risk of sacrificing a traditional domestic life. On the other hand, forty years before birth control became widely available, indulging in carnal passions posed great risks for liberated women.

For Millay, these very practical concerns were not even the central question. She was more concerned with issues of identity: was she primarily an ideal thinker, following some pure vision, or an earthly creature of passion? Was she a poet, or a lover? Or, as she suspected and dreaded, were the two inseparable sides of the same coin? Millay returned to these questions again and again, sometimes embracing and sometimes rejecting each identity. "Renasance," (1912) the poem with which Millay burst on the literary scene at age nineteen, details an extremely idealistic intellectual vision, in which the young poet's mind expands even to the reach of God's omniscience. In her following

collection, *A Few Figs from Thistles*, (1920) Millay seems almost to repudiate "Renasance"'s pure intellectualism, reveling in modern wit, carnal love, and feminine freedom with a group of poems that solidified her literary reputation as a joyful hedonist. With *Second April*, (1921) a new group of poems that appeared a year later, Millay began to investigate the tensions between the two positions she had played with. In "Wild Swans," from *Second April*, she offers a complicated and conflicted meditation on the tug of war between them.

Second April, which still ranks among Millay's best-known and perhaps best-executed collections, is also famous for the sonnet series at its close, a series of idealized love poems to fellow poet Arthur Davidson Fricke, with whom Millay had had an affair. The rest of the poems in the collection, although not overtly addressed to Fricke, were written during the same period and were likely influenced by their relationship.

One obvious reading of "Wild Swans" then is through the lens of this relationship and in the context of the poems about Fricke that follow "Wild Swans" in *Second April*. In this reading, "Wild Swans" follows the simple story of a poet's rejection of solitude and intellectualism in favor of shared passion. The poet, alone, describes herself looking around her heart while wild swans fly over her. The poet, it is implied, misses her chance to glimpse the flight of the birds and also finds nothing of value in her search of her heart, only "a question less or a question more." In comparison, the wild swans offer each other, and the poet, companionship. In response, the poet shuts the door on her "tiresome heart," and begs the birds to return to her to give her a second chance to catch the sight of them she has just missed, and perhaps, to join them.

The reading of the swans as symbolic of the choice of shared passion over the solitary intellectual life is reinforced by the language Millay uses to describe her heart and the birds' flight. Millay uses almost no imagery whatsoever in describing her heart. She asks, rhetorically, what she sees there, but leaves the reader blind with the line "only a question less or a question more." The only concrete images of her heart in the entire poem appear after she has rejected it in favor of the swans, when she describes it as a "house without air," to which she "lock"s the "door." The swans, on the other hand, are always described lushly, with flowing lines like "the flight of wild birds flying." Their physicality becomes even more clear in the final line, when the poet begs them to return, "trailing your legs and crying!"

Throughout her life, Millay would use her current personal experiences to lend focus and imagery to her long-term obsessions. Although it is likely that her relationship with Fricke strongly influenced "Wild Swans," there is far more than a personal relationship at stake, beneath the surface of the poem. In fact, "Wild Swans" is a far more complex statement on the strain between Millay's desire for intellectual solitude and her wilder, more "natural" side□and one which, although it seems to contain a decisive moment, actually contains no easy answers.

In a deeper reading, the first four lines remain much the same: the poet, regrettably, misses the flight of the birds due to her introspection, is disappointed by what she finds, and judges it finally inferior to the graceful arc of the swans across the sky. One might

assume from the opening that the poet will now make a decision to embrace the wildness and life of the swans instead of the sterile solitude of her heart. Even in anticipating this decision, the intellectual/natural dichotomy is thrown into question. Millay, after all, is not judging her mind inferior to the birds, but her heart. Traditionally, the heart is the location of the passion and freedom Millay sees in the swans. Millay's judgment against her own heart in the first four lines may not be a simple rejection of intellectualism; it may be a hint at Millay's own limitations, a suggestion that she does not have the same capacity for passion as the swans.

In the following lines, any hope of a simple division falls apart. For whatever reason, Millay, disappointed with her heart, accuses it of "forever living and dying." Again, this is not the kind of charge you would expect a poet to level if she were making a simple choice between the intellect and passion. If the swans represent life fully lived, then what crime has Millay's heart committed by "forever living and dying?" Actually, Millay's charge against her heart sounds more like the frustrated cry of an intellect that has become fed up with the vagaries of its emotional side, and would prefer a more reasoned, or stable, existence. If this is the case, then the symbolism of the swans themselves must be re-examined. Rather than freedom in passion and wildness, they may represent for Millay freedom from passion-flying high above daily trials, loves, and slights, unaffected by the "question less" or "question more," immune to "living and dying."

Millay, who had wrestled, and would wrestle, with these questions for the rest of her life, does not decide in "Wild Swans," although it is clear that she would like to. She implies that her heart has become unlivable by calling it a "house without air." She announces that she is leaving it, and for good measure, locking the door behind her. These lines, which seem so decisive, are actually rife with ambiguity. The major question is one of sheer possibility: can anyone, especially a poet, really leave his heart behind? It is not likely. Millay, who was both passionate and extremely bright, undoubtedly wrote these lines with a keen awareness of the futility of her announcement, even as she made it. She might wander the streets for a while, she implies, but she and her heart both know that she will be back later that evening.

In fact, the poem's two final lines, which seem to be an impassioned cry for the swans' return, further undermine Millay's declaration that she would leave her heart behind for them. Even as she repeats her plea for the swans to "come over the town, come over / The town again," she gives the reader the most complete description of the swans yet, adding that they will be "trailing" their "legs" and "crying." Both of these details suggest that the swans may not possess quite everything that Millay has imagined. Their perfect flight, whether it symbolizes purity of passion or of intellect, is marred by the description of their trailing legs, which complicate their silhouette. The trailing legs, which may seem useless in the sky but are absolutely necessary on the ground, remind the reader that it is impossible to leave some things (like the heart) behind and that even though the birds are now in flight, they must eventually land. The swans, as Millay suggests by mentioning their "trailing legs," may not be as free as they seem.

Finally, with the poem's last word, Millay tells the reader that the swans are "crying." In so doing, she strips away any last vestige of hope that the swans are truly living a better life than her own heart, with its incessant "living and dying." The swans, whether they stand for pure passion or lofty intellectual vision, suffer from the same pain and emotion as the poet. There are no simple decisions to be made amidst the age-old tensions. Although she stands outside her "locked" heart, claiming to call for the birds, the poem betrays that Millay recognizes the complexity of her nature.

Lover or visionary, passion or reason, social or solitary□the questions of identity Millay addresses in "Wild Swans" are too deep to be decided in eight short lines. But "Wild Swans," though brief, is a remarkably deep distillation of the tensions between body and soul, between the spiritual and the animal, that mankind has wrestled with throughout history and that would continue to haunt Millay for a lifetime.

Source: Carey Wallace, Critical Essay on "Wild Swans," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

Prebilic is an independent author who writes and analyzes children's literature. She holds degrees in psychology and business. In this essay, Prebilic discusses how Millay uses universal emotional associations and symbolism in her poem to share her life's experiences.

Millay published *Second April*, the strongly melancholic volume containing the poem "Wild Swans," in 1921. This anthology conveys the themes of love, nature, and death with free verse poems and passionate sonnets. Known for its spirited celebration of feminism and free love, this anthology mirrored the developing attitudes of an era of free choice. A number of critics believe that *Second April* captured the mood and atmosphere of Bohemian Greenwich Village in the glitzy post- World War I period. However, the poem "Wild Swans" shies away from the eccentric. Rather, it is a straightforward and intimate poem; an expression of a melancholy affair of the heart. It stays true to Millay's style of revealing a worldwide emotion, such as love, using a universal element and association with wild swans. Therefore, a complete interpretation of this lyrical poem requires a brief insight into Millay's background, as well as an understanding of swans.

Millay, commonly referred to as a feminist and an unconventional writer of her time, developed love relationships with both men and women. These experiences shaped her life and flavored her work. For example, like countless critics, Paula Hart in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* speculates that Millay's three-day love affair in 1918 with married poet Arthur Davison Ficke, "found direct expression in [Millay's] love letters . . . and indirectly in much of her other work." It is after this affair that Millay's collected works appeared in *Second April*. Whether the affair sparked this sorrowful poem, "Wild Swans," critics believe that her love for Ficke, and the subsequent loss, affected her for the rest of her life. Millay wove these intense experiences into her poems in a non-specific and musical way. By transforming her experiences into this style, she shared her wisdom and understanding. Millay's creative expression of these events gives *Second April* its acclaimed qualities.

In *Poetry Criticism*, Harriet Monroe affirms it flawlessly when she observes:

> Indeed, though love and death and the swift passing of beauty have haunted this poet as much as others, she is rarely specific and descriptive. Her thought is transformed into imagery, into symbol, and it flashes back at us from the facets of a jewel. And this thing is so simply done.

For example, "Wild Swans" draws on nature to explain a tragedy of love. It flows effortlessly on the page. The swans function as a catalyst for Millay's realization that her heart cries out for something more. The imagery of a swan as a symbol begins in the opening line: "I looked in my heart while the wild swans went over." The swans noisy

flight triggers Millay's reflection into herself. As Harriet Monroe observes about Millay's work: "in the lightest of her briefest lyrics there is always more than appears." This something more begins to form in Millay's delicate and well-implemented interplay of nature and emotion.

The depth of her poem is unveiled in the next words: "And what did I see I had not seen before?" Millay informs readers that she has thought about this experience many times. She alludes to an eternal hope that maybe this time she will see something new, something to fix what ails her heart. In reply to herself: "Only a question less or a question more; / Nothing to match the flight of wild birds flying." Immediately, readers understand that Millay continues to struggle with an unpleasant and dreaded reality. This tough reality cannot compare to the beauty of the swans flying overhead.

In considering Millay's piece, the beauty, determination, and stamina of the swan cannot be minimized. Weighing more than thirty pounds, and with wing spans eight feet from tip to tip, scientists consider swans the largest wildfowl. Swans grace this planet with supreme elegance, especially in flight. Anyone who has seen them cannot forget their beauty as they flap their wings furiously and methodically, legs tucked tightly behind them. Whether flying overhead or swimming across a lake, swans appear to be the classiest of the wildfowl. Although time and again romanticized in writing, these birds must work hard to survive.

When birds of this size begin to fly, they flap their wings and scoot along the water until they gain enough momentum to take off. This take-off sounds simple, yet it is not. It requires a long preparation that begins at birth and continues through a swan's lifetime. For instance, when a cygnet, or a baby swan, hatches from its egg, it spends its time eating, training, and exercising. It flaps its wings while bathing and when chasing other cygnets across the water in play. It takes many practice flights across the water, beating its newly feathered wings with all its power. These activities develop its strength and stamina, and train its flight muscles. It must be ready to migrate when the adult swans bob their heads and trumpet.

Millay discloses that she notices her: "tiresome heart, forever living and dying. / House without air, I leave you and lock your door." She has perceived the cycle of living and dying as the heart greets and says goodbye to love. Millay realizes that the events that brought her to this emotional place have not only caused her much heartache, but also have left her tired, depleted, and discouraged. She recognizes that she can choose to leave her situation and prevent herself from returning. From this sad and rejected place, Millay draws readers' awareness back to the swans by declaring: "Wild swans, come over the town, come over / the town again, trailing your legs and crying." Millay reveals her personal tragedy as she ends the poem by asking that the wild swans fly over the town repeatedly, "trailing your legs and crying." Perhaps Millay unveils that she wants the swans to do what she feels like doing□trailing her legs away from her situation that no longer provides nourishment and crying loudly in mourning for the loss of her dreams. Readers can sense the desperation Millay feels as she pleads with the graceful swans to come by again. Perhaps Millay finds comfort in the noise of their journey. She

may find beauty and hope in the gracefulness of their wings in flight. Maybe the noise will drown out the tears that Millay will shed.

As Millay leaves her "House without air," she must realize the extensive preparation it will take, similar to the preparation of a swan before migration. Perhaps the preparation comes in the form of mental readiness and self-awareness. Possibly, it is directly correlated to finding a new place and, in time, a new person to love. Whatever it is, Millay must know that it takes a Herculean effort to sur- vive wrenching away from a comfortable situation. However, unlike the swans that act on instinct without contemplation, criticism, or regret, Millay must face this departure with these emotions in tow. That realization makes the journey particularly difficult. Readers can almost feel firsthand the turmoil Millay experienced in wrenching herself away from her "House without air."

Millay chose her symbolism splendidly. Much like the endless tasks that encompass the daily life of a swan, Millay must work hard to understand her situation. She must have the courage to pursue a place with more nourishment. She must know that she can endure her journey, and that when she arrives at her destination, she can expect to find warmth, safety, and love. Her emotional survival depends on it. The cycle of living, learning, and loving for Millay will continue, with destinations shifting much like the cyclical migration of the swans. The swans express their voyage by trumpeting; Millay tells her journey through poetry. The result does not uncover how much preparation and tedium went into its creation and implementation. Observers only see the beauty or hear the call.

Millay wrote about her life as she lived it and her wisdom as it came to her. "Wild Swans" is no exception. Conceivably, Millay used her writing to clarify her life and give it meaning. Perhaps she wrote simply because she felt inspired to do it. Her ability to match wit and wisdom with imagery and symbolism may have been her spiritual gift. Nonetheless, she wrote about her experiences in an easy-to-read and comprehensible way. As Hildegarde Flanner remarks in *After the Genteel Tradition: American Writers since 1910*, "Millay is not to be classed among the 'makers' who have left language altered and disturbed by their experiments, ready for new forms and sensibilities. . . . She wrote in measures already possessing emotional associations for all readers." Her way of taking nature and applying its elegance to her life makes her poem seem simple and elegant.

Readers can identify with the universal experience of coming into a deeper awareness as a result of seeing a natural occurrence. How many times has one been distraught over a problem or situation, constantly questioning its meaning, only to come to peace with it one day through a simple yet profound revelation that seems to come from nowhere?

Millay's poetic approach remained uncomplicated yet universally meaningful throughout her life. Its straightforward and uncomplicated style defined her poetry and sonnets. As Amy Clampitt writes in *The New Republic*, Millay's style made "no real demand on her readers: an obscure word now and then, an occasional classical reference . . . so one

hardly feels obliged to look them up." Although poems from other authors may require attentiveness and speculation to fully understand their greatness, readers can readily grasp the experiences that Millay offers. This simplicity may be what inspires Millay's readers the most.

Source: Michelle Prebilic, Critical Essay on "Wild Swans," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Topics for Further Study

Compare the style of this poem to Victorian poetry, such as that by Robert Browning, Edward Lear, Matthew Arnold, or Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Consider differences in style, expression of emotion, and tone and write a Victorian version of Millay's poem.

"Wild Swans" is one of many poems that associate human emotion with birds. Other examples include Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Windhover," John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," and William Butler Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole." Read at least three other poems about birds and write an essay explaining why poets often use bird imagery to explore or describe human emotion.

Read Millay's "Renascence" or "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver," which are considered her crowning achievements in poetry. Write a review of the poem expressing your opinion of it and using as many specific references to the poem as appropriate. Take a stand on whether you think, based on the poem, that Millay should be considered a major or a minor poet.

Swans are considered among the most beautiful and graceful of all birds. Artists are often inspired to portray them. Find examples of swans in art and prepare a short presentation that discusses how swans are perceived by artists. Conclude your presentation with the example that best complements Millay's poem.

Swans symbolize different things in different cultures and religions. Do research to learn about the significance of swans in Christianity, Hinduism, ancient Celtic religion, and others. Then, write a short poem about swans drawing on the tradition that you find most appealing.

Compare and Contrast

1921: In late January or early February, T. S. Eliot begins work on his opus "The Waste Land." Eliot works on the poem throughout the year and sees it published in 1922.

Today: "The Waste Land" is among Eliot's crowning achievements and one of the greatest literary works to come out of the 1920s. Students of American literature study this poem as a matter of course in their high school, undergraduate, and graduate studies.

1921: President Warren G. Harding is inaugurated after winning the first election in which women had the right to vote. The Nineteenth Amendment, granting women over the age of twenty-one the right to vote, was ratified in August, 1920. This enabled millions of women to cast their ballots for the first time in American history.

Today: Voter turnout among women is low. Although more women vote than men (by a narrow margin), the percentage of voting-age women who vote in presidential elections hovers around 50 percent.

1921: World War I has been over for three years, and America is in a period of high spirits, confidence, patriotism, and growth. Many people are optimistic that the end of this war marks the end of large-scale wars forever.

Today: Having emerged victorious in World War II and smaller-scale wars such as the Persian Gulf War, Americans continue to feel confident in their nation's position as a world leader. American patriotism returns in earnest when terrorists crash planes into New York City's World Trade Center and into the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. In the wake of these events and President George W. Bush's "war on terrorism," Americans feel a renewed bond with one another.

What Do I Read Next?

Elizabeth Dodd's *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H. D., Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, and Louise Gluck* (1992) explores the lives of four twentieth-century female poets. Dodd shows how each woman navigated her male-dominated environment to find her unique voice as a poet.

Few novels capture the uninhibited consumption of the 1920s as well as F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic *The Great Gatsby* (1925). In a love story about Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan, Fitzgerald depicts the high-spirited parties and materialism of the decade.

Edited by Millay biographer Nancy Milford and published by Modern Library, *The Selected Poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay (Modern Library)* (2001) includes the poet's early works, her most renowned poems, and many of her sonnets. The introduction provides a biographical context for the reader.

Edited by June Skinner Sawyers, *The Greenwich Village Reader: Fiction, Poetry, and Reminiscences, 1872-2002* (2001) is a compilation of the work of some of the major writers who lived in and around Greenwich Village. Some of the selections are written about, as well as by, Greenwich Village literary figures.

Further Study

Freedman, Diane P., *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*, Ad Feminam: Women and Literature series, Southern Illinois University Press, 1995.

This collection of twelve essays addresses major themes in Millay's work and attempts to evaluate her stature in American literature. In addition to examining her poetry, critics include commentary on Millay's work in other genres.

Milford, Nancy, *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, Random House, 2001.

Milford's biography is the first comprehensive telling of Millay's life story. Until this biography, Millay's sister kept letters and journals out of the public eye, but she decided to release them to Milford for her authoritative book.

Thesing, William B., *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*, Critical Essays on American Literature series, Macmillan Library Reference, 1993.

Thesing's critical volume on Millay's work includes copies of reviews by her contemporaries and evaluations by modern critics. In addition to a thorough introduction, this book contains a fictional interview of Millay by Arthur Davison Ficke, a poet with whom Millay had a brief, intense affair.

Wukovits, John F., *The 1920s*, America's Decades series, Greenhaven Press, 2000.

Wukovits provides a historical and cultural overview of the 1920s. By using an anthology format, he is able to offer the reader first-hand accounts of many of the decade's events in addition to various viewpoints on the decade as a whole.

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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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