Witness Study Guide

Witness by Liz Waldner

Contents

Introduction

Liz Waldner's "Witness" is the final poem in the fifth section ("Triangle") of Waldner's Euclidian-inspired *A Point Is That Which Has No Part* (2000), following sections named "Point," "Line," "Circle," and "Square." Developing an extended metaphor that likens the coming of dawn (and the new day) to a wild horse, "Witness" exemplifies what is strongest in Waldner's poetry: diction, intellectualism, and an appreciation of science and nature. The combination of poetry and science characterizes much of Waldner's poetry. In her later work *Saving the Appearances* (2004), for instance, she uses Plato's idea, which was later applied by Copernicus, that there is a fundamental spirit that links the empirical world (its appearances) and the revelations it causes.

Author Biography

As of 2007, very little biographical information was available concerning Liz Waldner. She was born in Cleveland, Ohio, but was raised primarily in rural Mississippi before moving on to St. John's College, where she earned a B.A. in philosophy and mathematics. She later earned an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa and thereafter worked with various musicians and visual artists.

Waldner's poetry has appeared in the *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *New American Writing*, and *Ploughshares* as well as in such collections as *Etym(bi)ology* (2002) and *Saving the Appearances* (2004). A number of her books have been recognized with prestigious awards. *A Point Is That Which Has No Part*, in which "Witness" appears, received the 2000 James Laughlin Award. *Self and Simulacra* won the Alice James Books Beatrice Hawley Prize in 2001, and *Dark Would (the missing person)* won the University of Georgia Contemporary Poetry Series in 2002. Waldner was awarded grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the Boomerang Foundation, and the Barbara Deming Memorial Money for Women Fund as well as fellowships from the Vermont Studio Center, the Djerassi Foundation, and the MacDowell Colony.

The poems in her most celebrated collection, *A Point Is That Which Has No Part* blend mathematical questions with an experimental lyricism reminiscent of Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) and with a stream of consciousness that echoes such modern writers as James Joyce (1882–1941) and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941). The collection takes both its title and inspiration from Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*.

Plot Summary

Lines 1–2

The title of "Witness" identifies the subject at hand as bearing witness to an event (in this case, the appearance of a comet). The opening words of the poem, "I saw," stated in the past tense, indicate that the witnessed moment happened in the past and now remains clear in memory.

In the first couplet, readers are also asked to bear witness to the initiation of a metaphor that has both empirical and philosophical connotations. A "star" is compared to a horse breaking the rope that has kept it confined to "the stables." The rope of dust streams from the comet in the direction away from the Sun which it orbits. Without gravity the Earth (the speaker's vantage point) would not be held together as one sphere, and its orbit would not be fixed by its attraction to the Sun. Gravity affects locations of heavenly bodies and how and why they can be viewed by the speaker from the Earth. The speaker's imagination is shaped, then, by both the physical laws of the universe and by the poet's inclination to use metaphoric language.

Lines 3–4

Moving beyond its former location in the orbit/stable, the star/horse is imagined as "homeless." It appears dislocated and moving. The speaker asserts that the star/horse will find another "home." This new home is identified both in terms of time ("a green century") and space ("the foothills"). She gives a poetic version of the more complicated concept which physicists call spacetime. The anxiety associated with "homelessness" is counterbalanced by the comfort of knowing that the coordinates involved can determine future location. The idea that the star will settle in a new century suggests that it is actually a comet traveling its elliptical orbit around the Sun, which accounts for why the comet is visible from Earth for a certain period and then appears again at a distant time in the future.

In this couplet, too, the freed star/horse is described as female, which gives Waldner's metaphor another dimension. "Witness" becomes a poem that is about viewing a heavenly body that is described as a star, a horse, and a woman.

Lines 5–8

The third and fourth couplets form two sentences and can be treated together. Line 5 and 6 refer to space and time in new ways. The one "who sleeps besides still waters, wakes"; and "terrestrial hands" (human hands and the hands of a clock) mark the "heaven clock." The fourth couplet continues the second sentence: the "terrestrial hands" comb out "the comet's tangled mane / and twelve strands float free." The suggestion seems to be that the waking observer organizes the night sky in terms of

time or degrees and analyzes (combs out) the comet's tail. In the line, "comb out the comet's tangled mane" the metaphor of the horse appears in the use of "mane" and the "star" of the first line is now identified as a comet.

Lines 9–12

The fifth and six couplets describe a huge expanse of time, "an eon," which is a unit of time determined by estimates of geologic periods. The "strands" of comet dust mentioned in line 8 "twine a text" as slowly as "one letter" to "an eon." In such a period, the continents drifted to their present location, which might mean the period here spanned contained somewhere between 100 million and 275 million years. The poet imagines the swirling dust of twelve freed strands and how they weave themselves into "a text," so slowly only a letter appears for each eon. The colon that ends line 12 indicates that the twined text that ultimately appears is printed below, in italics.

Lines 13–14

The poet imagines that over this vast expanse of time, the comet's tail forms a statement in the sky: "I am the dawn horse. / Ride me." The witness on Earth imagines that over the eons in which the comet appears in the sky, the dust tail shapes this directive to any who can observe it. The message identifies the comet in the metaphor of "a dawn horse" and directs the viewer, the witness, to "ride" it.

Themes

Connections between Science and Art

"Witness" argues against understanding reality only in terms of mathematics and physics; it suggests through metaphor that heavenly bodies can be understood by acts of the imagination and the poetry these acts produce. This poem challenges the notion that science and art are mutually exclusive. The close observation of the night sky, the study of astronomy, can be transformed into poetry. A comet can be understood in terms of a metaphor. The physics involved in understanding how a comet orbits the Sun can morph into images of "the foothills of a green century." The concept of time provides the poet with an idea of how "terrestrial hands" (literal and metaphoric) allow one to *read* "the heaven clock." Humans tell time by the location of stars; geologists estimate the Earth's age by the location of tectonic plates, by theorizing about the movement of continents. All of this science is material for a poet to use in shaping a poem.

Identity and Language

In another sense, "Witness" attempts to unrope words from their traditional meanings. Cole Swenson in *Boston Review* explains that "every word points in several directions," and every reader comes to sense that "there is more than one way to move through language, and therefore language can never be entirely in control." Highlighting this absence of control, Waldner underscores one theme in her poetry, what Swenson describes as "the disintegration, or at least the radical transformation of identity . . . [that] is disintegrated into language." People know the world through the words and ideas that they attach to it, Swenson suggests. When a poem or a story challenges the relevance of words, this understanding of the world and of a person's place in the world is questioned.

The speaker of the poem, the "I," is the key witness. At the same time, though, the poem displaces this position, like the word assigned to "her," which dissolves into the *me* in the closing line. Who is speaking in these final lines? The comet's tail becomes the writer of text here, personified, speaking directly to the witness. The idea seems to be that the unroped star is invested over the eons with sentience and sentence; the metaphoric horse bids to be ridden.

The Significance of the Number Twelve

The number of strands in the comet tail, significantly, is twelve, a number that resonates through the poem. The number twelve coincides with the twelve months of the year, and there are two periods of twelve hours each in the day (midnight to noon, and noon to midnight). Twelve is a divisor of the basic units of the worldly clock. There are sixty seconds to the minute, sixty minutes to the hour, and twenty-four (twelve times two) hours to the single day. Moreover, both the western and Chinese zodiac systems have

twelve signs, each of which is related in various ways to constellations and planetary movements of a universe roped by gravitational fields.

The number twelve is significant in several other disciplines. It is an important number, for instance, in what is known as the mathematical Kepler conjecture, which deals with the implications of Euclidean space. Geometry reveals that it is possible to construct a perfect circle from straight lines shaped into twelve sections of thirty degrees each. Twelve, in this latter sense, is understood as the most natural division of the perfect circle. The human brain (arguably the seat of both the reason and imagination) has twelve cranial nerves, while the Bible tells of the twelve sons of Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel, and twelve apostles of Jesus. In ancient Greek religion, the twelve Olympians were the principal members of the pantheon, while the powerful Norse god Odin boasted twelve sons. The number brings numerous layers of possible meanings to a poem that is increasingly determined to avoid being confined by a single meaning or interpretation.

Style

Metaphor

Metaphor is figurative language that compares one thing, idea, or image (a star, for instance) to something else (a horse). Metaphors are traditionally divided into the tenor (the subject) and the vehicle (the object to which the subject is compared). In this poem, the comet is the subject and the horse that has broken its rope and moves free from its stable is the vehicle to which the subject is compared. The metaphor creates a correspondence, a poetic pairing, and that allows the poet to draw upon related associations. If the metaphor continues over a number of lines, as it does in this poem, it is called an extended metaphor. Parallels continue, new pairs of traits appear, extending across several lines of text. In this case, the metaphor culminates in the final lines when the comet's text in the sky beckons the viewer to ride the horse.

Metaphor expands readers' understanding of both the tenor and the vehicle. Metaphor allows both parts to be understood in new ways. Metaphor is an appropriate device for Waldner to use in "Witness," a poem that asks readers to view heavenly bodies from both a scientific and a poetic perspective.

Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of initial consonant sounds in close proximity within lines and stanzas. Examples of alliteration include such groupings as "float free" (repeating the f-sound), "dust . . . drift," and "twine a text." The repetition of sounds underscores Waldner's engagement with the physical elements of the world and the sound of the language attached to it. The alliterative passages turn language into music.

BOOK RAGS

Historical Context

Plato thought science and poetry were antithetical. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, challenged Plato's opinion. Aristotle explained that science and art more generally are complementary (rather than opposing) ways of understanding the world. Science studies the tangible, empirical world, and poetry expresses human perception and feeling about the world. Both seek truth. Dante in the thirteenth century argued that science is truth achieved through reason and poetry is truth achieved through imagination.

During the Renaissance, thinkers outlined a broader context for the arts, sciences, and philosophy. These disciplines were understood as interrelated and virtually inseparable. Artists used what they learned from scientific experimentation to design paintings that correctly conveyed a sense of depth and proportion. The human body was depicted in drawings, paintings, and frescos that proved the artist's efforts to convey correct anatomy. Indeed, one of Da Vinci's paintings is of an autopsy being performed. Also, paintings of outdoor scenes and landscapes incorporated realistic depictions of plants and flowers, thus revealing the artist's careful study of botany.

The rise of modern sciences through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries established an intellectual climate that was in many ways inimical to poetry. One seventeenth century rationalist, for instance, René Descartes saw the world as controlled by mind and asserted that matter has little significance by comparison to the workings of the mind. Descartes' theories, referred to as Cartesian philosophy, influenced others throughout this period, along with the works of other prominent rationalists, such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke.

William Shakespeare and John Donne produced poetry that incorporated science and traditionally literary subjects. This enterprise of drawing from various disciplines and weaving the ideas from them into a given work continued through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as seen in the writings of William Blake, Matthew Arnold, and Thomas Hardy in England and, on the other side of the Atlantic, by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edgar Allan Poe, among others.

Waldner's poetry explores the interrelationships between poetry and science (especially physics, geology, astronomy, and mathematics). This blending of systems contributes to a postmodern skepticism about the nature of reality. Waldner's poems invite readers to consider new ways of seeing and conceptualizing the physical world. "Witness" creates a world of shared knowledge and shared perspective. This synthesis brings together the cognitive (analytical) and the psychological (emotional) in such a way as to illuminate the correlations between the two ways of seeing and understanding.

Critical Overview

In a long review of *A Point Is That Which Has No Part* for the *Boston Review*, Cole Swensen notes Waldner's skill at using "language at the very end of its tether." Swenson observes "a thrilling tension and an almost visceral suspense" in the poetry. Admiring her craft, Swenson points out that Waldner "capitalizes on rhyme, off-rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration, and turns language into a muscled force that controls the choices she makes."

A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* applauds Waldner's ability to mix "sassiness, smarts and lyricism, intellectual querulousness with personal bitterness, vigor and exasperation." Despite what this reviewer calls a propensity for "metalinguistic obsessions," the poems in this collection never "prevent [Waldner] from seeing a real world with people in it." The reviewer recommends this "debut" as "worth seeking out."

Although reviewer Wayne Miller focuses actually on Liz Waldner's collection *Saving the Appearances* in his 2005 article for the *American Book Review*, his comments are relevant to readers of "Witness. Waldner is "at her best" as a poet, Miller observes, when "building off" the big ideas of such thinkers as Plato and Euclid, and when "playfully addressing how thought shifts" over time while moving always "toward a clarity of statement." He notes, she "is wonderful at quietly and subtly articulating the complexity of how one apprehends the physical world" and how that process at times collides with people's more emotional responses to the world.

Miller also maintains that Waldner seems to reach "for [a] spiritual principle" that will harmonize the complexities of the world. At other times, the poet is "equally good at [creating] mysterious, duplicitous endings" to her poems. Her most profound assertions occur, Miller concludes, in those poems in which the voice of "the heart selflessly and unselfconsciously reveals itself" to the pressures and idiosyncrasies of the world in which it exists. Deterred, on occasions, by a feeling of "scatteredness" in the poems, Miller is unwavering in his assessment of Waldner's poetry. Her "intellectual search for humanistic meaning and stability is an important one . . . that should continue to be engaged," he concludes. "At its best," Waldner's poetry "captures this noble and perpetual search both movingly and beautifully."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Dyer holds a Ph.D. in English literature and has published extensively on fiction, poetry, film, and television. He is also a freelance university teacher, writer, and educational consultant. In this essay, he discusses Waldner's "Witness" as a poem that rewards a reading that transcends traditional interpretations of metaphor.

Science tells readers that even the hardest, densest rock is made up mostly of empty space or, in a more abstract sense, of absence rather than presence. Such a radical subatomic reality cannot be perceived by humans, of course, despite the fact that there is an overabundance of data to serve as proof. Liz Waldner's "Witness" asks these same readers a number of deeply philosophical questions: Why is it that humans cannot see what science tells them is the reality of the world that exists beyond the world perceived by the senses? Why are most humans seemingly limited to a reality in which the idea of matter is more a useful fiction than a scientific reality? And, finally, is it possible for individual readers to develop so they can perceive things that are currently beyond the grasp of their imaginations?

Both star *and* horse exist simultaneously in the imagined space of the poem. Metaphor is suddenly rendered unnecessary as the distinctions inherent in comparison dissolve into a poetic space that is defined by an 'absence' and by 'drift.'

Waldner's poems question the way the world is understood in the present. Her poems spring from an interest in paradoxes uncovered regularly in science. Interested in what she perceives as a skewed perspective of the world, Waldner plays on the still unimaginable aspects of science (a rock that is more empty space than hardness, for instance) in order to lend the mysterious to the everyday. To Waldner, poetry provides a way to explore the paradoxes of scientific discovery. It is a path into a world that is surprising, elegant, and imaginative. Like Lewis Carroll, who invited readers down a rabbit hole into an eccentric world of looking-glass oddities, Waldner invites readers to enter the mysterious.

Waldner asks readers to move beyond an era when the concepts of space and time provided a constant language that made the world knowable and comfortable. These two terms (space and time) informed an age of belief during which the act of being in a specific place (a train station, for instance) at a specific time (noon) might actually mean something. Traditionally, such coordinates provided basic measures of a knowable reality. There was a physical certainty that allowed a traveler to visit the same station day after day. There was no need to debate the substance of the building and its environs. The traveler also knew that the restaurant next to the train station would be in its same space when the train returned in the evening. The world of the station remained stable and knowable.

Within this world of space and time, what came to be known as the poetic imagination embraced metaphor a tool of investigation. With metaphor the train station could become whatever the poet might wish it to become. Metaphor as a device allows for a comet to become an exuberant horse that breaks the rope that tethers it in a stable. Metaphor allows the imagination of the poet to break free of the logic of time and space and to venture beyond what the eye can see. Metaphor allows poets a safe way to imagine outward beyond culture's sometimes dogmatic belief in literal meaning.

Quantum mechanics gave people a more relativistic view of the world than previous science considered possible. Albert Einstein realized that the traditional understanding of space and time was flawed, that neither exists as an absolute. According to Einstein, the once thought-to-be permanent train station, like the once solid rock, became a matter of question. Whereas classical understanding of reality framed the existence of the train station in terms of a relationship of spaces (the station is either in one place or in another), quantum mechanics allowed for a reality in which both spatial arrangements occur at the same time. According to quantum mechanics, the train station exists in numerous places at the same time. The station, in other words, exists as a kind of possibility that exists here and there simultaneously. The reality of the train station, in other words, becomes defined by the presence of an observer who, through the act of seeing, makes the station real in the moment. Should this observer move or turn away, the station returns to the haze of possibility, awaiting another observer to recreate it in another moment of reality.

Waldner's "Witness" explores the limits of imagination and metaphor and the nature of reality itself. By witnessing the star, Waldner's speaker creates the reality of a star that moves untethered across the galaxy. The speaker's imagination creates the horse of the poem, an animal that breaks its rope and runs from "the stables of heaven." While a traditional view of the poem might explain this arrangement as a metaphor (the star is compared to a horse), a quantum reading would see the relationship as less comparative and more an instance of double identity. Both star *and* horse exist simultaneously in the imagined space of the poem. Metaphor is suddenly rendered unnecessary as the distinctions inherent in comparison dissolve into a poetic space that is defined by an "absence" and by "drift." Freed from rigid spaces of comparison, both star and horse run free in the parallel worlds made possible by the presence of the witness.

"Witness" allows the now parallel worlds of star and horse to call out to their observer. In the line "*Ride me*" horse and star speak together, fusing in the word "*me*." Thus, the language of the poem acts out the science of the poem, allowing imagination and reason to merge and to "twine a text, / one letter to an eon."

To mount the horse or ride the star is, as Waldner's poem suggests, a dramatic revision of the reality in which both poem and reader exist. To step across the breach of language and to become one with the poem dissolves the observer's position, turning the speaker of the poem from watcher (of the night sky, of the horse) to a rider being watched by another, unspecified witness to the events of the poem. If the witness acts, does she cease to be a witness and become a participant? And if she acts, who steps

into the role of witness, a position necessary to observe? Or is that stabilizing position necessary at all in a poem that celebrates multiplicity rather than singularity and that carries metaphor to new meaning? And what of the reader's role in this exercise? Does the new reader become the new witness, making the poem real in the moment of its reading? And should the reader, like Alice, be prepared for an invitation to ride the quantum poem into a new reality unlike any yet imagined?

Source: Klay Dyer, Critical Essay on "Witness," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• Research the history and mythology surrounding a single star (Eta Carinae or Krzeminski's Star, for instance) or a constellation (Orion, for example) from its classical origins through to modern times. Write a poem or interconnected series of poems that recounts this history and mythology.

• Do some research on quantum mechanics or string theory. Write a story or poem in which you imagine your life as it might be lived in a reality that is shaped by some of these concepts associated with either subject. How would one's sense of self be shifted by living in a world defined more by absence than by presence? How would such familiar themes as love, truth, and family life be different in this new world?

• Compose (using words—and pictures if necessary) the story of the life of a star or constellation from its birth to its death or transformation into a black space in the cosmos. Feel free to arrange and rearrange the fragments of this life as you deem necessary to represent the totality of this existence.

• Compile a collection of children's poems or nursery rhymes that focus on the night sky and on stars. Write a brief introduction to your collection, and provide illustrations for selected poems.

What Do I Read Next?

• Liz Waldner's 2002 collection, *Dark Would (the missing person)*, is a tough and often funny group of poems that uses Dante's idea of the dark wood and incorporates references to pop songs, other poems, and gender politics.

• Brian Greene's *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality* (2004) discusses concepts of spacetime and relativity and the fundamental nature of matter.

• For readers interested in the complex relationships between art and perception, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) remains a useful book. These essays discuss art, feminism, politics, and the business of publicity and self-promotion.

• Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) is a classic exploration of the intimate relationships between man and nature.

Further Study

Albright, Daniel, *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

A scholarly yet accessible study of the complex intersection between science and poetry in the work of three of the most influential poets of the modern era, this book examines the appropriation of scientific metaphors in the writing of the early twentieth century.

Levy, David H., *Starry Sky: Astronomers and Poets Read the Sky*, Prometheus Books, 2001.

The acclaimed science writer David Levy shows in this diverse and rich collection how the starry night sky has long captured the imagination of poets and scientists alike. This collection includes works by Galileo, Shakespeare, Milton, and Keats, among others.

Lockwood, Michael, *The Labyrinth of Time: Introducing the Universe*, Oxford University Press, 2007.

Starting from the physicist's assumption that the universe is a much stranger place than either science or poetry imagined, Lockwood enquires into the nature of things. This book is an engaging introduction to the physics of time and the structure of the universe that takes readers through the basics of relativity theory and quantum physics, including the ideas of Newton, Einstein, and Hawking.

Wudka, Jose, *Space-time, Relativity, and Cosmology*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

This book is an undergraduate-level historical discussion of modern cosmology. The book traces the roots and evolution of the ideas from antiquity to Einstein. The topics are presented in a non-mathematical manner, with the emphasis on the ideas that underlie each theory. The book also includes discussion of data gathered by the Hubble telescope.

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Review of *A Point Is That Which Has No Part*, in *Publishers Weekly*, February 7, 2000, p. 69.

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Waldner, Liz, "Witness," in *A Point Is That Which Has No Part*, University of Iowa Press, 2000, p. 66.

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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.

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"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.

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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

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