

Departure

by Rosanna Warren

W. W. Norton & Company

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

Midway through Warren's stunning poem "Intimate Letters," the following line, set off by itself, appears: "What can be assimilated into song?" This poem interpolates sentences from the correspondence of Czech composer Leoš Janáček, and that question--posed out of his personal grief and longing--could also serve as the guiding force for this entire work. Rosanna Warren's *Departure* proves that every aspect of life can be assimilated into song – the song of verse, the song of experience, the song of language. Her language is filled with elemental imagery of fire, air, earth and water that lifts these poems beyond the craft of their maker to assume a voice of ages. Each poem has an energy all its own, due to the craftsmanship and understanding of the poet.

The four sections of this book could be said to exist as individual departures in their own right, shifting through classical themes and inspirations; haunting images of personal love and the death of loved ones; imagined worlds where musical and emotional aspirations are wedded to lyrical character fantasies; and the fourth and final section melding all that has come before into a sort of homecoming with poems rich in natural life. *Departure* is truly a work of inspired grace that examines life and loss through a kaleidoscope of time, viewpoint, and remarkable language.

In "Postscript," one of several hauntingly beautiful poems chronicling the last stages of her mother's life, the poet and her dog move through the woods:

Over the black pond spreads a film of ice
like glaucoma, but water
wells out beyond ice, beyond
stones, beyond weed tufts...

Rosanna Warren's words are the water that will not be frozen. Seeking out new sources, new nourishment, her work continues the greatest tradition of poetry – an exploration of what it means to be aware of the present, mindful of our past, and ever always, alive.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the power and allure of the elemental forces of nature that continually draws poets back to this source of inspiration? Explore *Departure* randomly and examine what roles the elements play in Warren's poetry. Is the role significant, or subtle? Would each poem be as effective without their elemental references?
2. In the notes section of *Departure*, Warren tells us that Anne Verveine ("From the Notebooks of Anne Verveine") is "an imaginary French poet." If these notebook poems were not penned by Verveine, and her entire history is fictional, what might Warren's intention have been in creating this mask? Are there other instances of this kind of assumed identity in literature, and what might the intentions have been in those cases?

ACTIVITIES:

Rosanna Warren not only uses personal experience as the basis for her poetry, she delves into history, art and literature for inspiration as well. A wonderful poetry exercise is to write a work based on events or sources outside of oneself. For example, when Warren chose to interpolate sentences from the correspondence of Leoš Janáček, she chose a creative path that involved both his art-form as well as her own. This kind of poetry, dedicated to both the imagination of the poet and the use of predetermined historical or artistic evidence, creates a liberating sense of possibilities as well as a substantial challenge to the craftsmanship of the poet.

In the following exercises, allow a collaboration to form between you and some piece of historical fact. Create a work that contains your own view of life and sensation while aligning your view with a reference to or from another person's words or images. And remember, it has been said that every act of the universe can be seen as a poem, or poetic. If this is the case, we are surrounded by poetry at all times. Pick up a pen or pencil, or sit yourself in front of the keyboard, and try one or all of these exercises.

1. Reexamine a favorite passage from a novel, scan through song lyrics, or find a painting or sculpture that holds some interest for you. Bring those words or images to life anew by placing them within a poem of your own design, using them in such a way as to make them seem fluid and natural. Explore the personal meaning of those words or images that are not your own.
2. Similar to the previous exercise, find a painting or sculpture that *confuses* you in some way. The work in question does not need to be abstract, necessarily, it should simply provide you no clear or immediate inspiration. Sit with this piece for a few minutes. If it's a painting, try to place yourself inside the scene. If it's an abstract painting, examine the colors, the lines; imagine what the artist was thinking when he or she was inspired to create this work and begin your own piece with those thoughts.

3. One of the most intriguing aspects of poetry may be structure or form. Warren uses multiple forms in *Departure*, and this varied approach gives her work a good deal of its vibrancy. As an exercise, use a book such as Lewis Turco's *A New Book of Forms* to find a form to work in, or even create one of your own: perhaps choose a structure for your lines based on syllable count, varying the length from line to line. Working within a new form can be just as challenging and exciting as integrating creative elements from another's work. The possibilities with forms in verse poetry are just as limitless as in free verse, and perhaps more rewarding as they require a commitment to structure that has an amazing effect on things such as word choice.
4. As Warren did in "From the Notebooks of Anne Verveine," create a persona through which to write. Imagine a history, create a biography, and then place not only your work, but your mindset, within this new and original voice.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Excerpted from the Academy of American Poets website:

<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=191&CFID=2128443&CFTOKEN=13911364>

Rosanna Warren was born in Fairfield, Connecticut, in 1953. She earned a BA from Yale University in 1976, and an MA in 1980 from The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University. She is the author of *Departure* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2003); *Stained Glass* (1993), which was named the Lamont Poetry Selection by the Academy of American Poets; *Each Leaf Shines Separate* (1984); and *Snow Day* (1981). She has also published a translation of Euripides's *Suppliant Women* (with Stephen Scully; Oxford, 1995) and edited several books, including *The Art of Translation: Voices from the Field* (Northeastern, 1989). Her awards include the Pushcart Prize, the Award of Merit in Poetry and the Witter Bynner Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the May Sarton Prize, the Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets, the Ingram Merrill Foundation Award, the Ingram Merrill Grant for Poetry, a Lila Wallace Readers Digest Award, the *Nation*/*Discovery* Award, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies. In the fall of 2000, Warren was *The New York Times* Resident in Literature at the American Academy in Rome. She is a contributing editor of *Seneca Review* and the poetry editor of *Daedalus*. She is Emma MacLachlan Metcalf Professor of the Humanities at Boston University and lives in Roslindale, Massachusetts. In 1999 she was elected a Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets.

HELPFUL LINKS:

W.W. Norton & Company's web page for Rosanna Warren.

<http://www.nortonpoets.com/warrenr.htm#links>

If you'd like to read more poetry, or read *about* poetry, try either of these links for some great resources that provide a wide variety of poetry styles and voices.

<http://www.poets.org/index.cfm>

A poetry resource sponsored by the Academy of American Poets, of which Warren is a chancellor. The "Academy was founded in 1934 to support American poets at all stages of their careers and to foster the appreciation of contemporary poetry."

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/>

The Poetry 180 Project, created by Billy Collins, Former Poet Laureate of the United States (2001-2003). It was designed to attract high school students to poetry, but the poems included are universal, accessible and excellent reading for all ages.



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