



etruscan press

Rough Ground

By Alix Anne Shaw

A Study Guide for Students

Synopsis

Rough Ground is Alix Anne Shaw's imaginative translation of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical text *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Wittgenstein is a major twentieth century analytic philosopher from Austria known for his controversial, yet significant, contributions to fields ranging from culture to ethics to logic. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein argued that reality limits what we can think and talk about. *Rough Ground* challenges Wittgenstein, in part by weaving the story of a woman who witnesses nuclear war alongside the original text.

Why Include This Book in the Classroom?

Alix Anne Shaw's poetry offers readers an alternative to Ludwig Wittgenstein's turn to silence in the face of tragedy, arguing that language can make meaning in the face of meaninglessness. People experience hardship throughout their lives, and *Rough Ground* reminds readers that language, especially poetry, can be an outlet for anyone who suffers. Shaw's attention to concrete objects, such as birds, the willow tree, and rain, renders the original text both more intelligible and complicates it by adding layers of meaning.

Author Bio

Alix Anne Shaw is the author of three full-length poetry collections: *Rough Ground* (Etruscan 2018), *Dido in Winter* (Persea 2014), and *Undertow* (Persea 2007), winner of the Lexi Rudnitsky Poetry Prize. Her poems and reviews have appeared in journals including *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Harvard Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Los Angeles Review*, and *New American Writing*. She is also a visual artist. Her sculpture, writing, and performance-based work can be viewed online at www.anneshaw.org and anneshaw.carbonmade.com.

Study Questions

Section 1

1. What is your first reaction to *Rough Ground*? Can you relate to the speaker, the voice that tells the poems?

2. Compare two early poems in *Rough Ground*. Identify the tone, or emotion, of each poem. Are the tones of these poems similar? Different? Why or why not?

Writing Prompt: Compose a brief poem or a list of questions you have for the world, or a few objects in the world.

Section 2

1. As the narrator of *Rough Ground* moves from the forest to the city, her view of the city is shaped by her time in the forest. Think about a time when you moved from one place to another; it can even be as simple as moving from one room to the next. Do you think your view of the second place was affected by the first? Why or why not?

2. Find an unfamiliar word in *Rough Ground*. Look up the definition of the word, and explain it to the class/reading group.

Writing Prompt: The narrator of *Rough Ground* thinks about birds, houses, rain, and cities. Invent a story told from the perspective of an animal or an inanimate object. How might this animal or object view the world? What dreams might it have?

Section 3

1. Reflect on a time you were away from home, or someone you love. Did this experience lead you to reach out to others, just as the narrator writes letters throughout *Rough Ground*? How do you connect with others when you are not with them?

2. Assess the diagrams near the end of *Rough Ground*. Hypothesize why these images are in a book of poetry. Poems also make shapes with words. Choose a poem from the text. How does its shape on the page add to the poem's meaning?

Writing Prompt: Create your own "Notes for a Dream." Feel free to design your own project using any genre or style. There is no need to follow the example of Shaw's poems, although they may inspire you.



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