The Afterlife Study Guide

The Afterlife by Billy Collins

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"The Afterlife" was first published in *Poetry* magazine and is included in Billy Collins's 1991 collection *Questions about Angels*, where it appears midway through the second section just before "The Dead." It also appears in *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (2001) and is on Collins's compact disc recording, *The Best Cigarette* (1997). The poem describes the speaker's fantasies of what would happen if everyone, when they died, experienced the afterlife they believed in when they were alive. Like many of Collins's poems, "The Afterlife" is rife with humor and a wry sense of the unusual. Life after death is a serious subject and one widely addressed in poetry, perhaps most famously in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Here, Collins deflates the gravity of the subject by poking fun at the ways in which people have imagined the afterlife. In nine free-verse stanzas, the speaker describes what comes after death for various types of Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and the agnostic. Collins draws on religious stereotypes and figures from popular culture for his imagery, creating a kind of "cartoonish" feel in the poem. This style fits the context, however, as the descriptions have the feel of a daydream and are interspersed with the images of a person preparing for bed and waking in the morning.

Author Biography

In the early 1990s, Billy Collins became a major figure in the public imagination and, in the last ten years, has become arguably one of the most popular living poets in the United States, signing a six-figure book contract with Random House and being named as the 11th U.S. Poet Laureate in 2001. William Collins was born in New York City on March 22, 1941, to William Collins, an electrician, and Katherine Collins, a nurse. He was educated at College of the Holy Cross, receiving a bachelor's degree in 1963 and at the University of California, where he received his doctorate in English in 1971. That same year, Collins accepted a position as assistant professor of English at Lehman College of the City University of New York, and his first collection, *Pokerface*, was released in 1977 by Kenmore, a very small press.

It was not until 1991, when Collins's third collection of poems, *Questions about Angels*, was selected as a winner of the National Poetry Series that the poet began to develop a national reputation. Collins's smooth and charismatic reading style proved a perfect fit for National Public Radio, where he frequently read his poems on Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* radio program. In poems such as "The Afterlife" and "Questions about Angels," Collins exploits traditionally serious subject matter like death and religion for a chuckle. However, his humorous approach to poetry is not popular with everyone. Although he has been hailed by many critics as the next Robert Frost - a poet who appeals to academic audiences as well as to the general public - Collins has also been labeled a writer of "light verse" and criticized for his sometimes comic tone.

A tireless promoter of his writing and an advocate for poetry in the schools, Collins has won his share of awards. His 1995 collection, *The Art of Drowning*, was a finalist for the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, and he has received grants and fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation. In 1992, the New York Public Library chose Collins to serve as "Literary Lion." Collins's most recent collection is *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (2001), which has been well-received.

Poem Text

While you are preparing for sleep, brushing your teeth,
or riffling through a magazine in bed,
the dead of the day are setting out on their journey.
They are moving off in all imaginable directions,
each according to his own private belief,
and this is the secret that silent Lazarus would not reveal:
that everyone is right, as it turns out.
You go to the place you always thought you would go,
the place you kept lit in an alcove in your head.

Some are being shot up a funnel of flashing colors
into a zone of light, white as January sun.
Others are standing naked before a forbidding judge who sits
with a golden ladder on one side, a coal chute on the other.

Some have already joined the celestial choir
and are singing as if they have been doing this forever,
while the less inventive find themselves stuck
in a big air-conditioned room full of food and chorus girls.

Some are approaching the apartment of the female God,
a woman in her forties with short wiry hair
and glasses hanging from her neck by a string.
With one eye she regards the dead through a hole in her door.

There are those who are squeezing into the bodies
of animals□eagles and leopards□and one trying on
the skin of a monkey like a tight suit,
ready to begin another life in a more simple key,
while others float off into some benign vagueness,
little units of energy heading for the ultimate elsewhere.

There are even a few classicists being led to an underworld
by a mythological creature with a beard and hooves.
He will bring them to the mouth of a furious cave
guarded over by Edith Hamilton and her three headed dog.

The rest just lie on their backs in their coffins
wishing they could return so they could learn Italian
or see the pyramids, or play some golf in a light rain.
They wish they could wake in the morning like you
and stand at a window examining the winter trees,
every branch traced with the ghost writing of snow.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

In the opening stanza of "The Afterlife," the speaker addresses readers as "you," observing that, as they prepare for sleep, others are dying and "setting out on their journey." Journey, in this sense, refers to the experience of the soul after it leaves the body. Collins is drawing on various religious traditions that claim the physical body holds the essence of a person which is released upon death.

Stanza 2

The speaker sets up the frame for his depictions of the afterlife in the first sentence with the claim, "They are moving off in all imaginable directions." The remainder of the poem charts those directions. The "silent Lazarus" the speaker refers to is from the New Testament. In the Book of John, Jesus raises Lazarus of Bethany from the dead, but Lazarus does not speak of his experience. The narrator suggests that Lazarus knew that the afterlife was different for everyone but kept it a secret. The "alcove in your head" mentioned in the stanza's last line is a metaphor for the imagination, that faculty of the mind that can re-arrange perceptions and ideas.

Stanza 3

This stanza describes two popular views of the experience people have immediately following death. The first view comes from those who have literally died and have come back to life, via cardiopulmonary resuscitation or natural means. Such people frequently describe seeing a blinding white light and passing through a tunnel or tunnel-like shape. The second view is more explicitly Judeo-Christian in its imagery and involves a God who judges people by the life they have led, assigning them a place in heaven, which they reach via "a golden ladder," or hell, which they reach via "a coal chute."

Stanza 4

This stanza's descriptions more explicitly evoke certain people by virtue of what they believe they deserve in the afterlife. The first two lines describe sanctimonious and self-righteous people who believe they have led a good and just life (by Christian standards). The third and fourth lines describe people who have lived lives pursuing material pleasures, as suggested by their fantasies of "a big air-conditioned room full of food and chorus girls." The speaker refers to these people as "the less inventive," showing his own bias.

Stanza 5

This stanza evokes a stereotype of a feminist who asserts that God is a woman. In describing a middle-aged woman in glasses looking through the peep hole of an apartment at the recently dead, Collins pokes fun at the image of single, independent and intellectual women who reject status quo thinking about God's gender.

Stanza 6

This stanza refers to those, such as Hindus, who believe in reincarnation. Reincarnation, known in Sanskrit as "samsara," is the idea that the immortal soul reenters flesh (i.e., reincarnates) to resolve the consequences of past actions. Those entering the bodies of animals have been reincarnated as these animals. Collins uses a musical metaphor when he says these souls are "ready to begin another life in a more simple key," suggesting that human beings are burdened by their intellect and capacity to imagine.

Stanza 7

This description of the afterlife evokes some New Age explanations of what happens on a subatomic level after death. The description uses characteristically abstract language to describe an abstract phenomenon.

Stanza 8

In this stanza, Collins cobbles together references to a number of myths. "Classicists" refer to those who study Greek and Roman literature. The "mythological creature" alludes to any number of figures from classical mythology such as the unicorn. The three-headed dog the speaker mentions is Cerberus, a figure from Greek mythology who guards the gates of hell. Collins makes Edith Hamilton, a popular twentieth-century educator, writer, and historian who wrote well-known books such as *The Greek Way* (1930) and *The Roman Way* (1932), the owner of the dog.

Stanza 9

In this stanza, the speaker accounts for all those people not included in his other descriptions. Their desires for and dreams of the afterlife are pedestrian, consisting of a wish to visit the pyramids or learn Italian, to simply live again. The poem comes full circle in the last lines, as the speaker again addresses readers, who, unlike those he has described throughout the poem, are alive.

Themes

Humor

Because literature, especially poetry, has traditionally dealt with serious subject matter in a serious manner, critics rarely consider light verse "great" poetry. Collins's poem uses humor, however, to make a serious point: human experience is malleable, and the unknown far outweighs the known. By caricaturing those who hold various beliefs about the afterlife, Collins shows just how silly trying to fathom the unknown can be. For example, by depicting the feminist "god" as a kind of middle-aged librarian, he satirizes those who hold that God is a woman, and by depicting those who believe in reincarnation as trying to squeeze into "the skin of a monkey like a tight suit," he lampoons the beliefs of a billion Hindus. Collins, however, is an equal opportunity offender in this poem, satirizing the beliefs of most major religions and even those who do not believe in organized religion.

Religion

Historically, organized religion, particularly when it is enmeshed with government, has helped control the populace by describing the afterlife as a place of reward or punishment for the way people have lived their lives. Indeed, the laws of many countries are based, in part, on the religious traditions and teachings of those countries. Collins provides a primer of sorts in his poem on the positions held on the afterlife by large groups of twentieth-century people. He systematically addresses the beliefs of Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, classicists, feminists, agnostics, and atheists. In doing so, his speaker also indicts the religions themselves for being inadequate, for his portrayals include an implicit description of how individuals from these groups live. This strategy and the fact that, finally, the speaker has no belief of his own - apart from the ironic description of others' beliefs - draw attention simultaneously to the emptiness of his descriptions and the suggestion that perhaps he believes in nothing.

Meaning of Life

Theologians and believers of various systems have long argued that the afterlife is a place of reward and punishment for how an individual has lived his or her life. The meaning of life, then, its purpose, is to live well, treating other individuals with respect and kindness. The reward for a life well lived is eternal happiness in the afterlife (i.e., the life of the soul or spirit). For Collins's speaker, however, the afterlife is a place of representations, a place of the imagination. The goofy way that he describes afterlives - the equal weight he gives to all possibilities - compounded with the speaker's address to the reader in the last stanza, suggests that for the speaker the meaning of life is "simply" to be aware of the present and to participate as fully as possible in that

awareness. The simple act of being able to awake and look at trees, the speaker suggests, is meaning enough for life.

Style

Address

A poem of address is directed towards a particular audience. In this case, the speaker addresses "you" in the first and last stanzas. This suggests that the "you" is the reader, but it is also the speaker himself, or at least another part of the speaker. By addressing the second person, the speaker can create a tone both distant and intimate and dramatize what is at root a lyric poem. Other poets who have used the second person for this effect successfully include Mark Strand, Margaret Gibson, and John Hollander.

Tone

The tone of a poem refers to the attitude or stance of the speaker towards the subject matter. Collins's poem is at once comic and serious. His speaker takes a humorous stance towards the idea of life after death, treating the beliefs of others in a comic vein. Yet, the ending of the poem is elegiac. Elegies are poems or songs that mourn the loss of something or someone. Although "The Afterlife" does not mourn an individual, it does evoke the sense of loss, as evidenced in the poem's final image of "the winter trees, / . . . traced with the ghost writing of snow."

Caricature

To caricature something is to distort or exaggerate its features. Most often, artists caricature the features of people rather than ideas. The portraits drawn by the late Al Hirschfeld, printed in *The New York Times* or magazines like *Rolling Stone*, display exaggerated facial features that distinguish his typically famous subjects. However, Collins caricatures the beliefs of various religions in his depictions of their respective doctrines on the afterlife. The result can be a comic and/or simplistic summary. Well-known writers who have successfully used caricature in their writing include Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope.

Historical Context

When "The Afterlife" appeared in *Questions about Angels* in 1991, the United States was just emerging from the Gulf War, which started with Operation Desert Storm on January 16, 1991. U.S. troops were sent to oust Iraq's army from Kuwait. The war lasted only forty-two days, and some estimate that more than 100,000 Iraqis were killed during this time.

America has always been a fertile breeding ground for religious groups, both mainstream and unconventional, some dangerous. Americans were again reminded of this fact in 1993 when the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, investigating claims of firearms violations, raided the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, killing six Davidians and losing four of their own agents in the process. The Davidians, whose origins are in the Seventh-day Adventist church, were led by Vernon Howell (also known as David Koresh), a charismatic polygamist who prophesied the end of the world. A few months after the initial raid, the AFT again stormed the Davidian compound, and the compound exploded in flames, killing eighty-six people. Debate continues as to the cause of the explosion, though the government claims the Davidians started it.

Most Americans, however, do not belong to religious groups such as the Davidians. The majority is Catholic or Protestant. In fact, the proportion of Catholics in the United States increased from 24 to 29 percent from the 1950s to the 1990s, a consequence of the growth of the Hispanic population, which is overwhelmingly Catholic, during those years. Protestants, meanwhile, are in the decline, while the Jewish population remains at about 3 to 4 percent. A growing number of Americans - 8 percent - claim no institutional religious affiliation at all, and about 40 percent are not active participants in the institutions to which they do belong. Millions claim to be part of various "New Age" movements. One of the more popular beliefs associated with New Agers is reincarnation, which Collins parodies in the sixth stanza. New Agers often appropriate and "re-tool" traditional ideas to meet their own needs, and in some ways Collins' poem can be seen as a critique of the hyper-relativism of New Age spirituality.

As a result of the New Age boom of the 1990s, many people began revisiting ideas about the existence of angels, and angel imagery spread throughout American culture. A 1993 *Time* magazine poll reported that a majority of Americans claimed to believe in angels, and books about angels topped the bestseller list. Collins' book *Questions about Angels*, participated in this phenomenon. On Broadway, Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* featured an angel ministering to a man dying of AIDS, and a number of television shows featured angels as lead characters. In their article "Angels among Us," Nancy Gibbs and Sam Allis observe that New Age angels are "Kewpie-doll" cute, not the fearsome angels that appear in the Bible. Allis and Gibbs note theologians' understanding of the widespread interest: "For those who choke too easily on God and his rules . . . angels are the handy compromise, all fluff and meringue, kind, nonjudgmental. And they are available to everyone, like aspirin."

Critical Overview

Questions about Angels is widely acknowledged to be Collins' breakthrough collection, picked by Edward Hirsch as a selection in the National Poetry series for 1990. Reviews, however, were mixed, and critics remain divided as to the merits of his poetry today. Penny Kaganoff, for example, reviewing the collection for *Publishers Weekly*, writes, "Collins' images are often strange and wonderful but too frequently his poems are constricted by the novelty of a unifying metaphor." Echoing a common response to Collins' poetry often voiced by other critics, Kaganoff notes, "We can admire the scope of Collins' imagination, but his poems rarely induce an emotional reaction, precluding us from any affinity with his experience." Writing for *Library Journal*, Ellen Kaufman describes Collins' poetry as "metaphyscial musings in a whimsical mode," but admits that sometimes his poems are "occasionally glib or bland." Reviewing Collins' *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems* for *Poetry*, Dennis O'Driscoll emphasizes Collins' deft use of perspective and tone, asserting that "Billy Collins is not so much a comic poet inside whom there is a serious poet struggling to be let out as a poet who sees comedy as a legitimate vehicle for seriousness." Those who admire Collins' poetry are passionate about his work. Barbara Genco, for example, also reviewing *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems*, emphasizes Collins' accessibility to people who do not usually read poetry, and notes, "Collins' poems are precise, funny, heartbreaking, ironic, fresh, and wise."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of literature whose writing appears regularly in literary journals. In this essay, Semansky considers ideas of belief and imagination in Collins' poem.

A writer once said that nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who claimed that "God is dead," was a great religious thinker not because he pondered the metaphysics of Christian theology - he did not - but because in his scalding critiques of Christianity he addressed genuine religious questions such as "How should human beings live?" Collins, in his serio-comic book of poems, *Questions about Angels*, also addresses weighty religious questions without being religious. In poem after poem, he considers the ways in which religious imagery has become entangled with human thought and desire and ferrets out the meaning of such entanglements. In "The Afterlife," for example, Collins draws on the ways in which life after death has been represented in a number of religions in order to underscore the essential mystery at the heart of all belief systems and to emphasize the relationship between imagination and belief. By privileging the imagination over real belief in religious ideas, Collins participates in the modern inclination to see in literature and art a kind of secular salvation.

Imagination is at the root of belief. Although some people claim to have had visions of the afterlife, to have seen the dead, to have seen God, most believers content themselves with *imagining* how the afterlife might appear, based on its depiction in religious and historical texts. It is the human capacity to imagine that Collins really emphasizes in his poem. He begins this process by asking readers to imagine themselves going about the mundane activities of daily life, "preparing for sleep, brushing your teeth / or riffling through a magazine in bed." These are the times when people daydream the most, when they review their day and think about their future. All of the poem's images are associated with the end of the day and preparing oneself for bed. Just as readers prepare to end their day, the speaker suggests, the dead prepare to begin theirs.

Collins' unusual twist in the poem is that "everyone is right" in their beliefs about life after death. The dead begin their journey in the afterlife just where they left off in life, getting what they expected. Thus begins Collins' satiric jabs at the idea of belief itself. By using the view of relativism to structure his poem, Collins makes fun of much contemporary political thinking associated with ideas of tolerance. Relativism is a philosophical position often associated with thinkers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty. Relativists commonly hold that one thing (e.g., morals, beauty, knowledge, etc.) is relative to a particular framework or standpoint (e.g., culture, history, language, etc.) and deny that any standpoint is privileged over another. Critics of relativism assert that thinkers such as those named above claim that all belief systems are equally true and often blame relativists for the erosion of moral standards in contemporary society.

Collins's poem can be labeled relativist in that it asserts the afterlife of each individual is relative to his or her belief. Collins, however, is not serious in his claim. Rather, he uses the idea of relativism to challenge the very notion of an afterlife. He begins this challenge by calling on the authority of Lazarus, a biblical character best known for coming back from the dead. Collins turns Lazarus's silence about his experience into a secret the speaker of "The Afterlife" divulges to readers. Part of the charm of the poem is that it uses the Bible's authority to debunk its own representation of the afterlife.

At a time when calls for diversity can sometimes paralyze the mind's capacity to discriminate among even wildly varying choices, Collins illustrates the extreme of such thinking. His fantasy of an afterlife that pleases everyone exemplifies a kind of response that many might consider "politically correct," in that no one is wrong and everyone's belief is not only honored but validated.

However, this is a fantasy, and Collins makes sure readers know that. By showing that Lazarus's secret about the truth of the afterlife corresponds to the "alcove in your head," Collins highlights the link between the imagination and belief. Specifically, he demonstrates how the latter is a consequence of the former. Thinking itself is abstract, as is belief, and neither could exist without the capacity of the mind to form images, to give shape to the tumult of desire that propels human beings forward on a daily basis. The images Collins chooses satisfy as they entertain, titillate, and offend. They are at once hilarious and blasphemous.

Because the poem is about the afterlife, death plays a key role. Throughout the poem, the dead talk, they sing, they eat, but they never seem truly dead. Even when they "lie on their backs in their coffins," they still desire. Collins's genius is in domesticating the idea of death, making it palatable through his cartoonish depictions of the afterlife. The dead are not really dead but part of the continuum of life. He illustrates this idea in other poems in the collection as well, including "The Dead," the poem immediately following "The Afterlife." In the former poem, the dead watch over the living "Through the glass-bottom boats of / heaven as they row themselves slowly through eternity."

Collins' representations of the afterlife draw on images taken from popular culture, as much as they do hallowed religious texts and, as such, they illustrate the supremacy of the imagination, what poet Wallace Stevens called "the power of the mind over the possibility of things." Rather than affirm the continuation of individual identity after death, Collins' images play with the idea, manipulating readers' desire for such possibility while simultaneously caricaturing it. In the popular poem, "Sunday Morning," which spells out the significance of the imagination for modern society, Stevens writes, "Death is the mother of beauty." By this, Stevens means that the inevitability of death gives value and beauty to life, and that human beings should find meaning in the sensuous experience of earthly things rather than waiting for a reward in the afterlife. Collins echoes this sentiment in the last stanza of his poem by describing the death of those who died believing in nothing.

The rest just lie on their backs in their coffins
wishing they could return so they could learn Italian

or see the pyramids, or play some golf in a light rain.
They wish they could wake in the morning like you
and stand at a window examining the winter trees,
every branch traced with the ghost writing of snow.

The moral of the poem, then, is that the living should appreciate life, taking advantage of the opportunities they have and not spend it imagining what might come after death. Ingeniously, Collins bookends the various descriptions of the afterlife with the image of a person ending his day and beginning a new one, thus giving shape to both the journeys of the dead and the living. In addressing the reader, the speaker is also addressing himself. The "winter trees" and "the ghost writing of snow" evoke death's presence in life, its reminder both to be aware of the possibilities of the present and to honor the past.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "The Afterlife," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Pool is a published poet and teacher of advanced placement and international baccalaureate senior English. In this essay, Pool discusses Collins as an ironic, postmodern poet.

Billy Collins threatens to become the first genuinely popular American poet since Robert Frost and Rod McKuen. Unlike Frost, though, Collins suffers from a decades-long decline in publications that print poetry. Long past are the days when newspapers would regularly print verse and during which educated Americans were exposed to poetry in a variety of general magazines. But, unlike McKuen, whose works gained a great deal of popularity in the late 1960s, Collins is able to be accessible without being maudlin and banal. Collins' success, though, has bred its own species of critic such as Jeredith Merrin, who lambastes Collins' user-friendliness and lack of emotional depth. Writing in *The Southern Review*, Merrin asserts that Collins "is a writer who takes you for a walk on the mild side." On the other hand, Collins has retained an audience of perceptive and appreciative readers. Writing in the prestigious journal *Poetry*, the reviewer John Taylor has said, "Ultimately, a funny-sad ambiance characterizes his best work. His soft metaphysical touch seemingly derives from an acute awareness of man's irreparable separation from both material reality and any conceivable spiritual horizon." Collins is both accessible and accomplished; if he does not in the end plumb the depths of consciousness and the mystery of existence, he does write in an admirably engaging and entertaining style. "The Afterlife" is a poem with many postmodern sensibilities: allusive, ironic, self-reflexive, and humorous, it clearly illustrates the assets and liabilities of the poet's style.

Like many contemporary poets, Collins writes in free but not unstructured verse. His lines tend to contain five important stressed syllables, with a number of unstressed syllables falling in a natural, unmetered pattern. This rhythmic pattern is most likely a result of the poet's sense of line and rhythm rather than any conscious decision. It resembles Gerard Manley Hopkins's "sprung rhythm," which counts only the important syllables, but it is considerably looser. Merrin calls it "approximate pentameter." Occasionally, Collins will dispense with the five-beat line when it suits his purpose, as in the line "and this is the secret that silent Lazarus would not reveal." In his line and stanza structure, Collins implicitly respects form but clearly does not regard it as something to distract from the other aspects of his poetry, such as humor, surprise, and allusion. Indeed, it takes some work to see that Collins uses any rhythmic structure at all. The beat of the poem, such as it is, does its work upon the reader subliminally, beneath the conscious appreciation for meter that one sees in the poems of Robert Frost or other formalists.

One of the keys to understanding this poem is to recognize how the poet combines the mundane with the mysterious. Death is perhaps the most puzzling and inscrutable mystery that faces humans. It is the grounds of anxiety, the stuff of tragedy, and the source of sadness, poignancy, and passion. Most Americans, when polled, will say they believe in an afterlife, and doubtless many of those who cannot bring themselves to

such a belief have meditated on what survives of an individual after one has, in Shakespeare's words, "shuffled off this mortal coil." Essentially, there are two approaches to death, the tragic and the comic. Collins is a funny guy, and this poem is characterized by a bemused lightness of expression and a tolerant comic vision.

The opening lines of the poem juxtapose images of utter normality with a mysterious other-worldliness. The afterlife is seen as a nocturnal shadow-existence; the dead "of the day" start their journey each night, traveling away from the world of life and tooth-brushing and magazines. Collins does not have a single message to preach about the afterlife. A true relativist and postmodernist, Collins' single central insight, the secret that even Lazarus, the man raised from the dead by Christ, will not reveal, is that there is no one destination, that "everyone is right, as it turns out." If Paradise or Hell awaited everyone, regardless of their beliefs, then this would not be the light and humorous poem that Collins intends. Such a poem would challenge and frighten and imply moralistic judgment. The poet wants none of this; he couches his own poignancy over death in images that humorously reflect a variety of religious beliefs. Collins never quite states his own view on the afterlife, though he hints at it, at the end.

The first images of the afterlife are recognizable from contemporary religious traditions and popular culture. Some of the dead go into a white zone, a zone that hints at transcendence and a passage into another realm, but which remains reverently agnostic in being free of any details. Subsequent images depict the judgment of God in an almost cartoonish way, "with a golden ladder on one side, a coal chute on the other." The conventional image of the celestial choir is invoked here as well. For the shallow and hedonistic, the afterlife is just as they too would want it. The "less inventive" find themselves surrounded by the sensory pleasures of "food and chorus girls."

But none of this is funny, and Collins has set out to amuse his readers. A typical Collins poem often revels in humor and wit and irony on its way to some insight that is more substantial. After the conventional views of the afterlife, the poet regales readers with other images and ideas. Some of the dead approach the apartment of a female God who observes them through a hole in her door. This God is fully anthropomorphized as a middle-aged woman with "short wiry hair." Further, she has "glasses hung from her neck by a string." Nothing could be farther from the God of Infinite Justice and Retribution. "Quite so," one can imagine Collins saying. Many people want to be infinitely far from such a God.

Some people believe in reincarnation, and Collins represents this idea by speaking of people who are gearing up for a new life, "squeezing" into new bodies. Readers read about one soul "trying on / the skin of a monkey like a tight suit / ready to begin another life in a more simple key." Some are simply floating off into a sphere of "benign vagueness," reflecting the view that the afterlife has nothing specific to be said about it, that it is merely, as Collins says, "the ultimate elsewhere." It is all a matter of choice and individual belief, Collins seems to be saying at this point. Whatever one believes, that is what the afterlife is. Such a view is common among postmodern relativists. Such readers, and there are many of them, would find Collins' poem to be enlightened and nonjudgmental. Nevertheless, some of the dead seem to be sillier than the others. A few

classicists descend into a pagan underworld, guarded by Cerberus and, in a touch of mocking humor, Edith Hamilton, the compiler of one of the standard works of classical mythology, which is still taught in high schools and colleges.

In their instructive book *The Postmodern Turn*, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner distinguish between modernist and postmodernist writers by saying, "Where modern artists were typically insular, obscure, and idiosyncratic in their work, postmodern artists began to speak in the most available, public, and commodified languages." One of the keys to Collins's accessibility is that he does not, like the high modernists Pound and Eliot, allude to obscure texts and sources, challenging the erudition of the reader and requiring footnotes for most students to follow. Instead, Collins generally limits his allusions to writers one can expect to encounter in good high school classes and undergraduate literature courses. As one might imagine, such a middlebrow approach alienates the erudite but gains a following among the general poetry audience. Collins' poems reach out, not just to the readers of small and specialized journals, but to a public that wants some thoughtfulness but not bombast and pretentiousness. Jason Gray, in a sympathetic review in *Prairie Schooner*, calls the work the "poetry of the moment's reflection, the sigh, the wish, the little hopes of life." Fully congruent with postmodernism's distrust for "meta-narrative," Collins turns his attention away from grandiose gestures and systems and toward the lived moments and reflective incidents of a playful but rather quiet life.

At the end of the poem Collins seems to reveal his own views of the afterlife and in which the humor turns poignant. Readers may infer that Collins himself does not believe in the sorts of afterlife he has depicted in his poem. He puts his own attitudes into the perspective of the great class of none-of-the-above. "The rest just lie on their backs in their coffins"; because these people have no particular views of the afterlife, they have no place to go. Earth is where they direct their thoughts. Or, in Merrin's acerbic estimation, "What you already know on earth, he assures you, is all you need to know." Since the dead have their own simple desires, they think about rather simple and modest activities such as learning Italian, visiting the pyramids, or playing golf. All these activities seem rather whimsical compared to grandiose concepts of the afterlife. But they are all things that humans do, some, at least, and that most are capable of doing. In this last stanza, Collins exhibits a mild regret that life is too short and there are many worthwhile things that will never be accomplished. At the end, Collins says, "They could wake in the morning like you." This "you" is simultaneously a direct address to the reader, and it is the poet speaking to himself about his own mortality and his own limited sovereignty in the kingdom of the living.

The dead, as Collins represents, wish they could stand examining the winter trees, with "every branch traced with the ghost writing of snow." Aside from the quiet evocativeness of the word "ghost," this ending alludes to the famous conclusion of James Joyce's short story, "The Dead": "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead." For Collins, contemplation of the afterlife is really a call to reflect on life and the living. If one has no hope of eternal reward and no fear of damnation, regret and whimsical musing are fitting and proper attitudes. Collins, in his own quiet,

unpretentious, and somewhat postmodern way, brings his poem to conclusion in a meditative moment that transcends irony.

Source: Frank Pool, Critical Essay on "The Afterlife," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Marshall positions Collins within a wide literary context of poets from Wallace Stevens to William Wordsworth, noting Collins' penchant for the musicality of performance art and lyrical rumination.

Billy Collins' poetry has received a great deal of critical acclaim and several prestigious awards. From his first mature work in *The Apple That Astonished Paris* to his later *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems*, he has adopted a voice that is both philosophical and comic, intellectually stimulating yet accessible. In fact, Collins' attraction to performance poetry (his CD audio book *The Best Cigarette* sold well) and his reasonably large popular appeal might seem antithetical to the critical acclaim he has received. To put it another way, the accessibility of Collins' work and the emphasis by the poet and his publishers on his stature as a mainstream poet are quite unexpected in the work of one who is also so celebrated by academic critics.

Whatever the case may be, Collins' work is connected to the recent literary past and should be considered within the same context as the meditative lyrical practices of poets ranging from Wordsworth to Auden to the contemporaries Stephen Dunn and Linda Pastan. Frequently beginning with a subjective encounter with the external world, Collins' poems then embark upon ruminations that may allude to literary figures (Dickinson, Wordsworth, Yeats, and others) or to philosophy and religion. Collins has found a great deal of success with this mode, and perhaps the only criticism that should be levied against his work is that it seems from *Questions about Angels* to *Picnic, Lightning* that there has been little exploration in form or in terms of themes and subjects. Considering a few of the titles in *Questions about Angels* illustrates Collins' meditative lyrical practice. "Reading Myself to Sleep," "The Norton Anthology of Literature," "Going Out for Cigarettes," and "Weighing the Dog" are all poems that begin with a mundane experience and then move outward to a consideration of something meditatively engaging or philosophically puzzling.

Another aspect of Collins' work that separates him from a great many contemporary poets is the fact that he is also unabashed about using satire and humor, and his meditative lyrics utilize a range of tones, from the absurd to highly serious. Consider, for instance, these lines from "Marginalia" in *Picnic, Lightning*. The speaker asks all those who "have managed to graduate from college / without ever having written 'Man vs. Nature'" in a margin to step forward, comically undercutting the pedantic aspects of teaching literature. In another poem, however, Collins writes:

And the soul is up on the roof
in her nightdress, straddling the ridge,
singing a song about the wildness of the sea
until the first rip of pink appears in the sky.
Then, they all will return to the sleeping body
the way a flock of birds settles back into a tree.

This poem has a tone that is much closer to the lyrical mode of a poet like Wallace Stevens, and, coupled with the comic riffs Collins uses elsewhere, it is illustrative of his tonal range. The voice in these poems is always intimate, however, in a way that Stevens' work would never attempt to be. Perhaps this intimacy, as well as the frequent use of humor, is connected to Collins' emphasis on the performance dimensions of poetry and on his use of CDs and public readings to promote his work.

Collins makes frequent references to jazz and to musicians. This is another aspect of his interest in the performance possibilities of poetry and in the guise of improvisation his poems seem to aspire toward. The effects can be engaging if not always completely compelling as powerful poetry. Consider these lines from "I Chop Some Parsley While Listening to Art Blakey's version of 'Three Blind Mice'":

And I start wondering how they came to be blind.
If it was congenital, they could be brothers and sister,
and I think of the poor mother
brooding over her sightless young triplets.

Or was it a common accident, all three caught
in a searing explosion, a firework perhaps?
If not,
If each came to his or her blindness separately,

how did they ever manage to find one another?
Would it not be difficult for a blind mouse
to locate even one fellow mouse with vision
let alone two other blind ones?

There is doubt that this is clever, and it is popular. But many poets have attracted reasonably wide readership only to suffer anonymity in fifty years - or less. Whether Collins' work will avoid such a fate is still a question, one perhaps connected to whether or not he is willing to depart from his previously praised modes and develop his abilities in different directions.

Source: Tod Marshall, "Collins, Billy," in *Contemporary Poets*, 7th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 2001, pp. 186-87.

Adaptations

Collins recorded a spoken word compact disc, *The Best Cigarette* (1997), with Cielo Publishing. The CD includes Collins reading "The Afterlife."

Topics for Further Study

Divide into groups. Each group takes a major religion or ideology represented in Collins' poem (e.g., Hinduism, Christianity, feminism, etc.) and researches its position on the afterlife. Present your findings to the class and then discuss what Collins' representations leave out.

Take a class poll, asking students which stanza was most difficult to understand. Have students who understand particular stanzas explain them to those who do not.

Take a vote. Which of Collins' descriptions of the afterlife seems most appealing and why? Discuss as a class.

Make a list of what you want for your own afterlife and then write a short essay analyzing those criteria for what they say about your values and how you live.

Research the stories of those who have died and then come back to life. How do they describe their experience? Are there any elements these stories share in common? Discuss in pairs.

Write a short poem using a speaker who has died and gone on to the afterlife. Have the speaker describe his or her surroundings. Read your poem to your class.

Make a list of all the poems having to do with the afterlife and death in Collins' collection, *Questions about Angels*, and then write a short essay exploring the contradictions and similarities in his descriptions.

What Do I Read Next?

Collins' collection *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (2001) includes poems from his previous books of poetry.

J. Gordon Melton has assembled a comprehensive resource for information on a wide range of religious institutions and practices in the United States in *The Encyclopedia of American Religions* (1999).

Wade Clark Roof's *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (1993) charts the varied spiritual explorations of this generation from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Daniel Quinn's Turner Award-winning novel *Ishmael* (1992) explores the moral and spiritual issues that humanity must engage if it is to survive.

Further Study

Housden, Roger, ed., *Ten Poems to Change Your Life*, Crown, 2001.

Housden offers a selection of poems, both new and old, that aim to reshape the way readers think about and experience their lives. The poems are "spiritual" in the widest sense of the word.

Secor, Laura, "Billy Collins: Mischievous Laureate," in *Mother Jones*, Vol. 27, Issue 2, March-April 2002, pp. 84-85.

In this interview, Collins discusses his new job as poet laureate and his responsibilities after September 11, 2001.

Sewell, Marilyn, *Cries of the Spirit: A Celebration of Women's Spirituality*, Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

Sewell collects poetry by a variety of women and from a woman's point of view, on topics including marriage, death, birth, and loss.

Wuthnow, Robert, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II*, Princeton University Press, 1988.

Wuthnow's study charts the major trends in American religious experience since the end of World War II, focusing on the decline in the denominational divisions that were once so important in American religious life.

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BOOKRAGS

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535