Air for Mercury Study Guide

Air for Mercury by Brenda Hillman

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Contents

Introduction

Brenda Hillman's poem "Air for Mercury" was published in her 2001 collection *Cascadia*, which most critics acknowledge is Hillman's most ambitious work, if not her most accessible work. The volume was inspired by Hillman's love for her adopted state of California. Cascadia refers to the prehistoric landmass that predates California and America's West Coast□a landmass that was submerged under the ocean more than 100 million years ago. In *Cascadia*, Hillman uses this ancient geological occurrence as a springboard to map the various geological and cultural characteristics of modern-day California. But, as Hillman herself notes in an online interview with *Poets & Writers* magazine, "The main geography of the book is the idea of mind-as-earth." The book, then, becomes an exploration of the shifting tectonic plates of the human mind, what she refers to as "the ceaseless slow and potentially violent nature of change . . . the upheaval of ideas or feelings." This abstract notion permeates the book and is present in "Air for Mercury," which some students may find confusing at first. In the poem, Hillman seems to incorporate several different image systems and concepts in one shifting mass that defies cohesiveness. But by viewing the poem in terms of the human "change" that Hillman notes, the poem begins to make sense, and its dominant themes, the loss of religious faith and comprehension as modern society moves toward secularization, begin to shine through. A copy of the poem can be found in *Cascadia*, published by Wesleyan University Press in 2001.

Author Biography

Hillman was born on March 27, 1951, in Tucson, Arizona. She began writing poetry as a child and pursued her love of writing at Pomona College in California, where she graduated in 1973 with her bachelor's degree. She continued her graduate education at the University of Iowa, where she received her master's of fine arts degree in 1975. After school, she moved back to her adopted state of California, where she worked as a salesperson for University Press Books in Berkeley from 1975 to 1984. During this time, she married Leonard Michaels (1976) and published her first book of poetry, *Coffee, 3 A.M.* (1982). In 1984, she began teaching English at St. Mary's College in Moraga, California. She eventually became a professor of creative writing, a post she still holds today.

In 1985, Hillman published her second volume of poetry, *White Dress*. She and Michaels were divorced the same year. Over the next decade, Hillman published four more books of poetry: *Fortress* (1989), *Death Tractates* (1992), *Bright Existence* (1993), and *Loose Sugar* (1997). Through these works, Hillman established herself as an extremely experimental poet, and some critics consider her 2001 collection, *Cascadia*□which includes the poem, "Air for Mercury"□to be her most ambitious experiment yet.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

The first noticeable aspect of Hillman's "Air for Mercury" is the title, which can be interpreted in two different ways. The title could be noting an alchemical change, where air is transformed into the metal mercury. Or, it could denote the Roman god, Mercury. At first, it's not clear if either of these interpretations is correct. The poem's first section starts out with the following two-line stanza: "After the double party / for the poorly loved." At this point, it is too early to guess what this "double party" might signify, or who the "poorly loved" might be. The next few lines give some more setting details: "when the gleam in the hound's eye / fell like glass rain on the south / lawn of the countergarden." As with the terms "double party" and "poorly loved," the "hound" is probably symbolic. A symbol is a physical object, action, or gesture that also represents an abstract concept, without losing its original identity. Symbols appear in literature in one of two ways. They can be local symbols, meaning that their symbolism is only relevant within a specific literary work. They can also be universal symbols, meaning that their symbolism is based on traditional associations that are widely recognized, regardless of context. Again, it is unclear at this point who or what the hound is meant to symbolize, and whether or not this symbol is local or universal.

The image of the "countergarden," however, draws attention to itself. In literature, poets and authors often use gardens to symbolize the biblical Garden of Eden. Looked at in this way then, the "countergarden" could symbolize the human world after the biblical fall from grace when Adam and Eve were forced to leave Eden. Yet, again, this is only one interpretation, and this interpretation does not necessarily coincide with the next part of the poem: "when / the image of false flags sank." What are these false flags, and whose flags are they? In any case, Hillman notes that the image of these flags "sank / in the mirrored plaques," and that "when the mirrored plaques / had been passed in, they took / your days and gave them back." At this point, one can start to make some assumptions about the poem, the biggest of which is the fact that Hillman is trying to convey a sense of time passing, and of several human events having occurred. The "false flags" seem to refer to one of the human wars, most likely a modern war involving the United States, since the dominant topic that pervades Hillman's *Cascadia* is the history of California. In this case, the mirrored plaques might be referencing a type of after-war ceremony, where the victors give each other plaques and other awards of distinction. Yet, the war could also be symbolic and meant to convey the sense of an ideological war.

With the phrase "took / your days," Hillman identifies a subject for the poem. But who is the "your" referring to? Returning to the title of the poem, the "your" could be referring to the god Mercury, and Roman gods in general, since the days of the week were originally named after Roman gods, including Mercury (Wednesday was originally known as Mercury's day). This interpretation would introduce a strange time paradox because the renaming of the Roman days into their current Anglo-Saxon incarnations

took place long before the founding of California and even before the founding of the United States. What becomes clear at this point is that Hillman is not creating a unified image system. If one tries to literally analyze the majority of her words, as one usually does in poetry, it leads to a number of conflicting interpretations. Instead, Hillman is a poet of sense and feel, as the next lines indicate: "before you unsnapped first / the crenellated shoulder wings / then the fumbling then the little / ankle wings." Again, it is tempting to think that Hillman is talking about the god Mercury, who is known for his wings. Yet, Mercury is usually depicted as having either ankle wings or a winged hat, *not* shoulder wings, which are more a hallmark of Christian angels. So with these lines, it becomes clear that Hillman is merging several concepts. Her references to Roman mythology help to introduce the concept of religion, which is underscored by the addition of angel-like shoulder wings, a symbol that points to the Christian religions.

In the next lines, the religious character to whom the poem is addressed sends its wings "back / to the wing patrol, in the box / in the metal box, in the genital / mouth of the rose." Now that one understands the first section of the poem is talking about religious issues in general, Hillman's imagery begins to make sense. The "wing patrol" becomes an institution, or perhaps a collection of institutions, that has stripped religion of its wings, which could be interpreted as symbolizing faith, or religious influence. The box itself, which is made of metal, is tied to the human world, since metal is an earthly element. And the fact that the box is referred to as a "genital mouth of the rose" indicates that this loss of faith is, in part, due to an increase in sexual freedom, which has helped to undermine the moral aims of many traditional religions. Hillman inserts a parenthetical phrase that covers many lines and which talks about "the open forms / of the state" being "undone," and thus leaving the religious figure "stranded / on the nonimperial coast having / a boat unnamed for you." These lines seem to reference the separation of church and state that is a part of America's constitution. Since these state institutions are not allowed to endorse religion, the religious figure loses even more influence and becomes "stranded" on a coast□the coast of California. The coast is "nonimperial" because America is a democracy, unlike the English monarchy from which the first English-speaking settlers emigrated to North America.

Stanza 2

In the second section, Hillman switches gears, invoking an image of nature and posing a question. As with the first stanza, these two concepts do not seem to relate to each other. But, in the next stanza, Hillman again evokes the idea of nature, in this case a season: "A season stopped by without your / noticing, saying, lost file, breath boy." Here, Hillman is discussing the modern predicament of being so involved with the everyday details of one's life and work that the seasons can pass without notice. The use of the words "lost file" seem to imply a lost computer file, as if nature is just one more bit of computer data to be processed and that it can be "lost" as a piece of binary data can be lost if one is not careful.

The next lines continue the associations with nature, saying that "the sun had leaked its power / into things." While Hillman could be talking only about the sun itself, the

previous focus on religion in the poem suggests otherwise. In a symbolic sense, the sun is often associated with the divine. So, if the sun has leaked its power into things, then this is a sign that the secularization of human society, addressed with the religious references in the first section, is far advanced, and religious power has been transferred into material items. Taken in this context, the "notation" that Hillman mentions next refers to Scripture or other religious writing, which are thought to have been inspired by God but were transcribed by human hands. This makes sense when one looks at the next lines: "you'd been trying / to talk to them from this / coast." Again, the "you" refers back to the unnamed religious figure in the poem, who, symbolically stranded in California, has been trying to spread the message of religion. This figure had "been trying to help / them in their small groups." This wording evokes an image of a small group of people gathering for church. Also, the use of the word "small" is important because it underscores the decline of church attendance in California.

Stanza 3

In the third section, Hillman begins to tie these concepts together: "Monsters of will and monsters of / willlessness confront the garden." Here, Hillman plays off of the image of the countergarden that she used in the first section, as she talks about the "monsters," which refer to the classic human sins. For example, a monster of will could refer to "pride" or "anger," while a monster of "willlessness" could refer to the sin of "sloth." The mention of "dusk" in the next line is also symbolic since darkness is often used to denote evil, or ignorance, or one of countless other negative meanings. The next lines seem to indicate that the darkness is a form of spiritual darkness: "Rhyming is a tool of / friendly desperation." This rhyming evokes images of the rhymes found in church choir songs, which are generally friendly, given their communal quality, but which can also be sung in desperation by the hopeless, the spiritually dark, who are searching for their faith. But as Hillman notes, "The spirits will return / though they're not here now."

Stanza 4

The final section of the poem starts out with several references to religion and earth: "Oracles, iron, the misuse of fire / under the young earth, and this / business of being infinitely swept up / in possibility," The oracles evoke the classical mythology of the Greeks and Romans, which again ties into the idea of the god Mercury. The rest of these lines seem to discuss the concept of faith. When people are truly faithful, they can be "infinitely swept up / in possibility." The "luckless forms" mentioned a few lines later refer back to the "forms" mentioned in the first section, which, again, referred to American institutions. The word "luckless" implies a negative, as if people cannot find hope in these institutions. For, as Hillman notes next, "night had been / deployed." Again, in this poem, Hillman uses darkness as a symbol of spiritual darkness. In the next line, she takes another religious jump when she discusses "*anima mundi*," a Latin phrase meaning "world soul." This philosophy states that there is a universal soul that is related to the physical Earth in the same way that the human soul is related to the physical human body. So at this point, Hillman has referenced classical Roman

mythology, Christianity, and *anima mundi*. After exploring these various forms of religion, she changes tactics again.

In the second half of the *anima mundi* line, she asks "weren't there / two forevers, words and space." The words evoke the image of the "notation" that Hillman referenced before, which, again, is a reference to religious writing. So, if there are two forevers between these religious words and space, then Hillman is saying people need to read between the lines and not focus so heavily on the words themselves. The reference a few lines later to "your / logics, your letters" seems to take this concept and apply it to the philosophical texts of the classical world, the Greek and Roman world of gods such as Mercury. Using the above interpretation, Hillman is talking about logical and religious writings from the classical world, which people should not take too literally because, as Hillman notes, there was "So little space / between your letters, the words couldn't / easily air themselves." It is here that Hillman ties the poem to its title. "Air for Mercury" is Hillman's request to "air" out ancient writings□both ancient religious texts and philosophical texts from Greek and Roman times when they believed in gods such as Mercury□and read between the lines, finding personal meaning in both the words and the spaces.

The last two stanzas reinforce this, as Hillman notes that "You," which at this point could be loosely interpreted as any form of religion or religious influence, and not necessarily a specific religious character such as Mercury, "were meant to take black / netting off a face or two." Netting, or veils, are symbolic objects that hide something. So Hillman is saying that these various forms of religion were meant to illuminate life for their followers. But as Hillman notes in the final stanza, "Passion brought you / here; passion will save you." In other words, she is saying that organized religions and philosophies, which follow strict interpretations of words, are not the way to salvation. Instead, people should follow their passions, read between the lines, and develop their own beliefs.

Themes

Religious Faith

Hillman's poem examines a number of religious themes, the primary one being the concept of religious faith. Over the course of the poem, Hillman uses several symbols that indicate this faith is being lost. In the first section, Hillman addresses the poem to what at first appears to be the classical Roman god, Mercury. This figure sports "crenellated shoulder wings," which is an important detail. When something is "crenellated," it is furnished with battlements, the square notches found on castle towers, which were used to provide openings through which to shoot at one's foes with arrows. The fact that Hillman is using a warlike image underscores the conflict between religion and secularism over the course of human history, especially in modern life, where the poem ends. In this section, religion loses the battle, and the Mercury character is forced to take off his shoulder and ankle wings, which are boxed up□a clear sign of the loss of religion. Without these wings, which are the source of this figure's power and which could be loosely interpreted as religious influence, the figure is "stranded" in California, a state that, as both this poem and others in the *Cascadia* volume indicate, has lost its faith. This loss of faith is symbolized in other ways in the poem, such as in the third section, where Hillman discusses "Monsters of will and monsters of / willlessness," which confront the biblical Garden of Eden, thus ensuring that man will remain a fallen race. As this loss of faith continues, the "dusk" in the third section, becomes "night" in the final section, symbolizing complete spiritual darkness.

Religious Comprehension

In addition to the loss of religious faith, Hillman indicates, as time passes in the poem, there is the loss of religious comprehension. She hints at this loss in the beginning of the second section, when she poses the question, "Of what is knowledge made?" While knowledge can be taken to mean many things, within the context of the poem, which uses a lot of different religious symbols, this knowledge is increasingly identified as religious knowledge. Later on in the same section, Hillman notes that "all notation had / become inaccurate." These notations, or classic religious texts, are inaccurate because they do not apply to modern life anymore. A new translation is needed. Likewise, church songs, referred to in the poem as "Rhyming" that is used as "a tool of / friendly desperation," no longer illuminate religion for people. In the final section, Hillman addresses the issue of religious comprehension head-on, talking about "two forevers, words and space, between / which more *experience* might ride, unencumbered?" Hillman's emphasis on the word experience, is important. This emphasis implies that if people give up the old ways and do not stick to the old interpretations of religious texts, they may have a better experience in life. By reading between the lines, and allowing both the words□and by extension, the religious concepts attached to these words□to air themselves, then people can regain their religious faith, begin to comprehend the

concepts behind the words, and ultimately save themselves by finding the passion of religion once again.

Style

The most noticeable aspect of Hillman's "Air for Mercury" is its structure. Hillman divides the poem up into four separate sections, which are labeled with simple numbers, one through four. This construction is deliberate on the poet's part and works to reinforce the underlying subject of the poem, the passage of time. The number four is a potent number in poetry, especially in poems that discuss time passing, because it evokes images of the four seasons passing in nature□a powerful theme that many authors employ in their literature. Indeed, as the poem progresses, Hillman gives little clues that each section may be intended to stand for a season. Sometimes these clues are blatant, such as in the second stanza of the second section, when she notes that "A season stopped by without your / noticing." In other sections, the link to seasons is more subtle, such as in the third section, when Hillman talks about the crow greeting "dusk," a natural state that precedes darkness in a typical day.

In literature, the season of winter is also often symbolized by darkness since when snow blankets the land, the days get shorter and darker. Winter is also commonly associated with death since most vegetation dies during the winter and is reborn in the spring. This concept correlates to Hillman's references to spiritual death, and her use of "something white" in the fourth section could very well be a reference to snow. So, if this is the case, then the dusk reference in the third section would relate to the season of fall, which precedes winter. Working backwards then, the second section would correlate to summer and the first section would correlate to spring. Given the context of the poem, which depicts a religious faith that starts out strong but slowly weakens and dies as organized religion becomes cumbersome and society embraces secularization, it makes sense that Hillman structures the poem to follow a natural, seasonal cycle.

Historical Context

Given the shifting quality of the poem, it is unclear when Hillman intended "Air for Mercury" to take place. She uses time-sensitive words such as "After" in the first line and "before" in the eleventh line, which indicate that she does have a time in mind, but these and other time-related words do not work together as a whole to give the reader a clear sense of time and place, and, as noted above, Hillman seems to take a long historical view when discussing religion, going back as far as classical Greek and Roman times, and as far forward as modern day. Yet, Hillman seems to use this indeterminate setting for a reason to reinforce the underlying concept of change. As the poet herself notes of *Cascadia* in an online interview with *Poets & Writers* magazine, "It is conglomerate and metamorphic in that it seems like a gathering of materials about change."

It is not hard to understand Hillman's focus on change, when one looks at the state of affairs in the United States and the world at the time that Hillman was writing the poem. The last few years of the 1990s and the first part of the new millennium were as chaotic as the shifting geology of modern-day California. A number of world-changing events happened in rapid succession, which collectively undermined society's feeling of security and stability. During the late 1990s, United States President William Jefferson Clinton was embroiled in a number of scandals, including a sexual harassment suit that was brought against him by former Arkansas state employee Paula Corbin Jones. This case led to the infamous exposure of Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, a former White House intern, and ultimately to Clinton's impeachment by the United States House of Representatives on December 19, 1998□although he was acquitted in his United States Senate trial. Clinton was only the second United States president to be impeached, and in poll after poll, this move was not supported by most of the American population, some of whom worried that the social stability of the country would be weakened if the president was impeached.

In the late 1990s, the world was gripped in a millennial fever. In addition to the supposed religious significance that some groups attributed to the millennial change, society also faced what appeared to be an impending, global technology breakdown: the Y2K bug. This so-called bug was really just a programming error from the early days of computers. When computers were first developed, memory space was very expensive, so programmers saved space and money by truncating the four-digit year and using just the last two digits. Even after the modern computer revolution, when computer storage space became much cheaper, programmers tended to use two-digit years out of habit. In the 1990s, some computers, such as retail computers that tried to process credit cards that expired after the year 2000, would not accept the post-2000 two-digit years. For example, 2003 would be read by the computer as "03," or "1903," which took place before the 1990s, so the computer would think it was an error and refuse to process it. These isolated examples led to a widespread panic, and many predicted that the world's technology, which was largely driven by computer chips that contained this faulty coding, would shut down on January 1, 2000. Companies, governments, and consumers around the world collectively invested billions of dollars in

computer renovations to fix the problem. As it turned out, New Year's Day 2000 passed without incident.

Later that year, however, the American people witnessed more instability in its highest office, in this case during the controversial 2000 presidential election. The anticipated tight race between Democratic candidate Albert Gore and Republican candidate George W. Bush turned out to be even closer than expected. While the votes were still being tallied, it appeared that George W. Bush was the clear winner, and Gore phoned Bush to concede. But as the election results were tabulated in Florida□where people in certain counties complained of confusing voting ballots□it became clear that the election was going to come down to just a handful of votes. With this tight margin and with the prospect of confusing ballots that might have caused people to vote for the wrong candidate, Gore withdrew his concession and filed for a hand recount of the Florida vote. Bush moved to block this recount, and the battle raged along partisan lines for more than a month, everywhere from the press to the Florida legislature to both Florida and federal courts. Ultimately, the case went to the United States Supreme Court, which stated that any recount must be completed before the official deadline for certifying official votes. Since this ruling came mere hours before this deadline, not leaving enough time for a hand recount, the presidential election, for the first time ever, was essentially decided by the United States Supreme Court.

Critical Overview

Hillman's *Cascadia* has received largely positive reviews, although many critics have noted the difficulty of the work. As Kevin Arnold notes in the online poetry journal, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, "The only constant on the pages of *Cascadia* is the page number." This lack of cohesiveness is not a negative aspect, though, according to Arnold: "Her poetry is not intentionally obscure," he says. "However, given the scope of the greater work, individual poems are not necessarily easy to comprehend on a first reading." In her review of the book for *Library Journal*, Rochelle Ratner agrees: "Not for the casual poetry reader, *Cascadia* is nevertheless highly recommended." Ratner sees the chaotic nature of Hillman's collection as evidence of "a mature poet taking more risks with each successive volume." Indeed, the reviewer for *Tikkun* calls *Cascadia* Hillman's "best book yet" and says that the poet "finds herself 'in search for the search' of a poem." For Hillman, as the reviewer notes, "The poem is 'Cascadia,' a landmass west of a California submerged beneath the ocean circa 130 million years ago." This reviewer is one of many who comment on the relation of this landmass and geology in general to the poems in Hillman's collection. But not everybody is totally enamored of the book. For example, while the *Publishers Weekly* reviewer notes that the poems are "sometimes inspired," the reviewer also says of the book as a whole that Hillman "spins a luminescent web of vivid, disjunctive lines into an uncertain whole." The reviewer notes that this uncertainty, especially in longer poems, which would include "Air for Mercury," is not always a good thing. While "Hillman's longer pieces try hard . . . the results can shine in single lines and stanzas, though they sometimes fail to cohere."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Hillman's use of structure to influence the pacing in the poem.

Reading and understanding a poem such as Hillman's "Air for Mercury" takes work, as some critics note of the entire *Cascadia* volume. Rochelle Ratner, the reviewer for *Library Journal*, says that the volume is "Not for the casual poetry reader." Likewise, in his review of the volume for *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, Kevin Arnold notes that "The only constant on the pages of *Cascadia* is the page number," although he does not see Hillman's poems as "intentionally obscure." But Arnold also acknowledges that "given the scope of the greater work, individual poems are not necessarily easy to comprehend on a first reading." This is especially true for some of Hillman's longer poems in the book, such as "Air for Mercury." As the *Publishers Weekly* reviewer notes, "Hillman's longer pieces try hard," but while "the results can shine in single lines and stanzas . . . they sometimes fail to cohere." Still, in the case of "Air for Mercury," by examining the poem's pacing, which is directly influenced by Hillman's choice of structure, the poet's intent becomes clear.

The pacing of a literary work refers to the speed at which it progresses. In poetry, a work's intended pacing is largely determined by the type of structural elements that a poet uses. The first element that Hillman uses in "Air for Mercury" is the length of the sections. A casual glance at the poem reveals a huge disparity in the size of the four sections. Visually, the first and fourth sections appear to be the longest, while the middle sections are noticeably shorter. When one counts up the lines in each section, this initial observation proves to be true. The first section contains twenty-three lines, the second contains ten lines, the third contains six lines, and the fourth contains twenty-two lines. By bookending her poem with longer sections like this, it appears that the pacing will be slowest in these lengthy sections, since it will take readers longer to read them. But just as Hillman's imagery is deceptive□shifting among several different concepts□the structure is also not what it appears.

When one examines the flow of the poem within the first section and compares it to the flow within the other sections, the first, and longest, section turns out to have the fastest pacing□due to Hillman's use of enjambment. Poets use the technique of enjambment, which means continuing a phrase or sentence from one line or stanza to the next, to express various thematic or emotional qualities. When one examines the first section, it is revealed that this section is, in fact, one long phrase that is continued over twenty-three lines. The phrase is not even technically a sentence, since it ends on a dash, not a period: "having a bout of meaning□" As Hillman notes of *Cascadia* in an online interview with *Poets & Writers* magazine, she was interested in the shifting geology of the human mind. The book, then, becomes an exploration of what Hillman refers to as "the ceaseless slow and potentially violent nature of change . . . the upheaval of ideas or feelings."

This feeling of change is most apparent in the first section, which essentially gives an overview of human history and religious ideology as it has changed through the ages. While Hillman notes in her interview that change is "slow," in the context of the first section of the poem this change is very quick and chaotic because she piles all of the historical events on top of each other in one long phrase. The section lacks the hard stop of any punctuation endmarks□such as periods, question marks, or exclamation points□which complete a thought in poetry before moving on to the next one. The main body of the section does not even include any alternative punctuation marks that could be used as an endstop, such as a semicolon or a dash. As a result, the reader does not have any motivation to stop and so reads through this long, multi-stanza phrase without stopping, until reaching the single dash, located at the very end of the section. In fact, Hillman's choice to end this section on a dash is also calculated. By indicating that the sentence never ends, she underscores the idea of change, which, as she notes in her interview, is also "ceaseless."

In the second section, however, Hillman abruptly switches the pace, slowing it down to express several distinct thoughts, such as in the first stanza: "A leaf hurried by on its / side. Of what is knowledge made?" In a marked contrast to the first section, where there are no hard endmarks, this section includes two endmarks (a period and a question mark) within the first two-line stanza. Hillman's intent is clear. In the first section, the theme was the ceaseless change and evolution of the human mind and its associated ideologies, but, in the second stanza, she is slowing the reading pace down, giving her readers time to reflect on what she is saying. Ironically, while she slows down the reading pace, the themes she discusses in this second section all deal with the rapid pace of human life. The leaf is "hurried," just as the unnamed person in the third line is hurrying through life, and misses an entire season, which "stopped by without your / noticing," because the person is so involved with the everyday details of life and work.

The third section is also a slower-paced section, consisting of four distinct, enjambed thoughts that are separated by semicolons or periods. Collectively, these four thoughts address the lack of faith in Hillman's society, where "Monsters of will and monsters of / willlessness confront the garden." In this culture of sin and temptation, "Rhyming," or spending time singing in church, "is a tool of / friendly desperation." People have lost faith and are desperate because they may not get it back.

In the beginning of the fourth section, the pace mimics that of the first section. Hillman includes one long, stream-of-consciousness-style thought that is enjambed over the first four stanzas, ending in the middle of the fourth stanza. As with the first section, these stanzas give an overview, in this case of various religious and philosophical ideas, such as "Oracles" and "this / business of being infinitely swept up / in possibility," which reflects a sense of hope and faith. Yet, Hillman soon slows down the pace again: "But night had been / deployed." The short sentence about night underscores the spiritual darkness that exists in the modern world. And by ending the enjambed sentence on one word, "deployed," this word sticks out and is given more emphasis.

This is deliberate on Hillman's part. "Deployed" is a word commonly associated with war, so the intent is to show that society is losing the war against religious despair.

Hillman also chooses to end the section, and the poem, with a series of short, enjambed sentences, in which she talks about taking "black / netting off a face or two," and advises the "you" character, which at this point can be viewed as a general reference to religion, to "Take / something." This two-word sentence, the shortest in the poem, sticks out because it is so short. Hillman is hinting to her readers here, letting them know that this thought is important. What should readers take away from the poem, though? The answer is in the last sentence: "Passion brought you / here; passion will save you." Hillman is advocating getting in touch with one's passions, which she believes are the key to salvation, not organized, inflexible religious doctrine.

Hillman employs one final structural element to influence both the pacing and the meaning of the poem. Throughout the poem, in all four sections, she relies mainly on two-line stanzas. But in the first section, she switches tactics after the seventh stanza and includes a one-line stanza, "to the wing patrol, in the box," which draws attention to itself. In fact, although the first section still reads quickly, as noted before, the contrast between the two-line stanzas and the sudden, shorter stanza is enough to slow the pace down a little. When a poet employs a variation from an otherwise uniform structure, he or she generally does so for a reason. In Hillman's case, she chooses to do this to underscore her thoughts about organized religion. A "wing patrol" is Hillman's way of symbolizing the institutions that have stripped religion, and spirituality in general, of its faith, through rigid doctrine that does not make as much sense in modern life.

In the end, the seemingly chaotic and shifting pace of Hillman's poem, while adhering to the poet's intention of mapping the chaotic geology of the human mind, becomes yet another tool that she uses to underscore the importance of not adhering to rigid religious doctrine. For, just as the earth's tectonic plates shift and rearrange, crushing any rigid structures in their path, so must spirituality be flexible or risk being crushed by the shifting of human society itself.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "Air for Mercury," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Topics for Further Study

In the poem, Hillman makes use of a seasonal motif in her structure to help convey the sense of time passing. Find another literary work that uses a seasonal motif and compare it to Hillman's poem. Make a list of the comparisons you find and note where they differ.

Research the mythology surrounding the Roman gods, including Mercury. Create a chart that shows the place of each of these gods as they were viewed in the divine hierarchy. Include a small description for each god, highlighting which aspects of human life they were associated.

Research the philosophy of *anima mundi*. Write an essay outlining the history and characteristics of this philosophy. In your essay, compare *anima mundi* to another religion or philosophy that is either very similar or vastly different.

Research the doctrine and rituals of two religions other than the one you practice or the one in which you were raised. Discuss at least one of the traditional texts associated with these religions. Then, using Hillman's suggestion of "airing" out the words, try to read between the lines of these words and generate other possible interpretations.

"Air for Mercury," like all of the poems in *Cascadia*, was initially inspired by Hillman's fascination with the prehistoric landmass known as Cascadia, which was submerged off the western coast of the United States more than 100 million years ago. Draw a map of what the world most likely looked like at this point and identify the locations of at least five modern-day countries, including the United States.

What Do I Read Next?

In "Air for Mercury," Hillman depicts a society that mourns the loss of its religious faith. In *Death Tractates* (1992), Hillman explores the issues of loss and separation in general. Hillman wrote these poems after losing a very close friend of hers.

In "Air for Mercury," society becomes more chaotic as people lose religious faith. On a similar note, Hillman's *Fortress* (1989) depicts people that struggle with many issues, including the question of art, economic problems, and failure.

Like *Cascadia*, Hillman's *Loose Sugar* (1997) includes poems that examine an aspect of time. Unlike *Cascadia*, however, which focuses on time and change, *Loose Sugar* focuses on time's role in language and comprehension. The book was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

John McPhee's modern classic *Assembling California* (1993) takes readers on a journey with McPhee and geologist Eldridge Moores. Along the way, he explores the state's geological controversies and tectonic plate movement in an engaging, narrative style.

One of California's most celebrated writers, John Steinbeck was known for his regional literature. In *The Long Valley* (1938), a collection of short stories, Steinbeck offers several profiles of the state's people, many of whom were immigrant farm workers that came to California seeking better times and who faced loss and heartache in the unforgiving environment.

Further Study

Barr, Stephen M., *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2003.

While modern science is often used to disprove the idea of religious faith, Barr takes the unusual approach of using science to support this idea. His accessible book follows the concept that scientific disciplines such as quantum physics make more sense if one believes in a divine creator.

Berry, Matt, *Post-Atheism: A Mechanist's Journey from Christian Materialism to Material Spirituality*, 1st Books Library, 2001.

In its wide-ranging discussion of religion, Hillman's poem touches on the relationship between spirituality and things in modern society. In Berry's book, he proposes a post-atheistic type of spirituality that is also materialistic in nature.

Bolton, Lesley, *The Everything Classical Mythology Book: Greek and Roman Gods, Goddesses, Heroes, and Monsters, from Ares to Zeus*, Adams Media Corporation, 2002.

In Hillman's poem, she references the Roman god Mercury and refers to other classical texts from this era. In this book, Bolton gives a thorough overview of all of the major deities and supernatural beings in the classical world.

Harden, Deborah, *California Geology*, Prentice Hall, 1997.

Written for non-geologists, Harden's book serves as a good introduction to California's geology. Using the state's plate tectonics as an organizing theme, the book also discusses natural disasters, California's history, and the impact of geologic processes on society.

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Arnold, Kevin, "The Only Constant Is the Page Number: Brenda Hillman's *Cascadia*," in *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Spring/Summer 2003.

Hillman, Brenda, "Air for Mercury," in *Cascadia*, Wesleyan University Press, 2001, pp. 29—31.

□□□, "Brenda Hillman on Her New Volume of Poetry, *Cascadia*," exclusive online interview in *Poets & Writers*, http://www.pw.org/mag/dq_hillman.htm, posted August 30, 2001.

Ratner, Rochelle, Review of *Cascadia*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 126, No. 18, November 1, 2001, p. 98.

Review of *Cascadia*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 248, No. 32, August 6, 2001, p. 86.

Review of *Cascadia*, in *Tikkun*, Vol. 18, No. 3, May—June 2003, p. 96.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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