The Alchemy of Day Study Guide

The Alchemy of Day by Anne Hébert

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Introduction

Anne Hébert's "The Alchemy of Day" was published in her poetry collection, *Mystere de la Parole* (*Miracle of the Word*) in Canada in 1960. Like most of her works, this poem received little critical attention, especially from English-speaking critics, since, even though much of Hébert's work was translated into English, Hébert was not well-known outside of Canada. Also, Hébert's best-known work, *Kamouraska* (1970), a novel that was adapted into a film, has overshadowed much of her other work. "The Alchemy of Day" is on its surface a nature poem, which seems to have spiritual significance as well. When one examines its historical context, however, as well as the author's preface to *Mystere de la Parole*, the poem takes on added meaning. When she wrote the poem, her native Quebec was undergoing a drastic change known as the Quiet Revolution. During this time period, many residents stressed the need for a unique Quebec culture, a sentiment that ultimately led to a movement that advocated separating from Canada. As Hébert notes in her preface to the book, she feels that Quebec can never have its own identity without a unique language. In her mind, the imprecise language that existed in Quebec in 1960 kept the province from achieving cultural autonomy. The poem, then, through its depiction of a difficult conversion□symbolized with nature imagery□becomes Hébert's attempt to ritually give birth to this language of Quebec. A current copy of the poem can be found in the reprint of *A Book of Women Poets from Antiquity to Now*, edited by Aliki Barnstone and Willis Barnstone, which was published by Schocken Books in 1992.

Author Biography

Anne Hébert was born on August 1, 1916, in Sainte-Catherine-de-Fossambault, Quebec. Suffering from a childhood illness, she was schooled at home in her early years. She had the influence of several fine literary minds as she was growing up. Her father, Maurice-Lang Hébert, was a distinguished literary critic, and several of his friends were well-respected intellectuals in Quebec. Her cousin was the poet Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, a man who remained in self-imposed isolation until his death. Hébert also attempted the renunciation of worldly pleasures, having been raised a strict Roman Catholic and seeing herself as having a spiritual and poetic obligation.

From this state of spiritual struggle, she produced her first two works. The first, *Les Songes en equilibre* (1942), or *Dreams in Equilibrium*, is the poetic account of a young woman growing from a happy childhood to a life of spiritual solitude and austerity. In her second work, *Le Tombeau des rois* (1953), or *The Tomb of the Kings*, Hébert reveals that this seclusion had negatively affected her work, and she emerged from her religious struggle and came to look at the written word as a spiritual practice. Hébert's works have recurring themes of solitude and the past, as do the works of many French-Canadian writers. She also creates a sense of melancholy and often features a child or adolescent as a main character in her writing.

As a poet and novelist, Hébert completed more than 30 works in her lifetime, including *Mystere de la Parole* (1960, *Miracle of the Word*), which contained the poem, "The Alchemy of Day." The poet earned several awards in her lifetime, among them the Prix de la Province de Quebec, the France Canada prize, and the Duvernay prize, all in 1958 for *Les Chambres de bois*, or *The Silent Rooms*. In 1982 she won the Prix Femina in 1982 for *Les Fous de bassan*. Hébert died of cancer on January 22, 2000.

Plot Summary

Stanzas 1—6

The first thing to note about "The Alchemy of Day" is that it is an English translation of a French original. Because of this, and because critics note that Hébert's poetry, like much of modern French poetry, is notably difficult to translate into English, one can best understand the poem by focusing on the conceptual meaning of the lines, as opposed to placing undue importance on single words, which may not be what the author intended.

The first line starts out with an address to an unnamed "you" character. The speaker in the poem tells this character: "Let no girl wait on you on that day when you bind your wild / wounds, bloody beast, to the black pine's low branches." Already, the poet has invoked the "day" from the title, but as of yet, one does not know what this day is. The "wild wounds" of the "bloody beast" invokes images of nature, as does the image of the tree, but it is still too early in the poem to know who the "you" character is, or whether this character is supposed to symbolize anything. The fact that the character is wounded and bloody immediately sets the mood for the poem. Whoever or whatever the "you" is referring to is obviously injured, so the poem begins on a sorrowful note. The second stanza introduces two sets of girls, one "around the rusty fire" and one "with violet hearts." At this point, it is safe to assume that Hébert is speaking symbolically, since normal, human girls do not have "violet hearts." Yet it is still too early to know who these girls are.

In the third stanza, the poet notes that "All seven of them will appear in your room carrying blue pities in / quiet amphorae hoisted on their hair." Seven is a very spiritual number, which is found in many religions. At this point, one could guess that the number seven might have some sort of spiritual importance in the poem, too. Indeed, these seven girls are "carrying blue pities" in "amphorae," a type of Grecian urn. Seven girls bringing flowers to the wounded "beast" invokes an image of compassion. But the description of the vases as "quiet" is curious. Generally speaking, when a poet uses an adjective such as "quiet" to describe an inanimate object such as a vase□which is not capable of making noise□it is a clue from the poet. Again, at this point, not enough is known to determine what the importance of this word might be. In the fourth stanza, the poet continues her description of the seven girls, who "slide along the thread of their mauve shadows" in a "quiet" procession that takes place "along the four winds of your walls." The image of sliding along a shadow implies something that is hidden, as does the reference to the "back" of flames that are "underwater." Again, the poet uses the word "quiet," which makes sense when examined along with the hidden imagery. Noise is not hidden, but silence implies that sound is hidden. The four winds reference finally identifies the bloody "beast," which is Nature, or Earth, itself.

The next stanza begins by telling Nature not to "warn the girls with green felt feet cut out of antique rugs / reserved for the slow unrolling of sacred sorrows." At this point, one

can guess that, if the beast is Nature, then the girls must be agents of Nature, either mythological beings such nymphs or various aspects of nature. The reference to the "green felt feet" suggests the latter. The girls' feet are made of grass, which is used to unroll "sacred sorrows." Here, the poem reinforces the sorrowful mood from the first stanza, and goes on to include more grass references: "soft meadow / mowed by the sun, silent and thick grass without the cry's stark / space." Hébert again describes a non-speaking object, the grass, as "silent," which is contrasted in the same line with "the cry's stark / space." This is the first reference to a sound, which suggests that, since the poem has been silent up until now, the "alchemy," or transformation, mentioned in the title may have something to do with sound. Indeed, in the next stanza, the poet talks about "the hidden strong vibration of an underground love," which she compares to the "song" of a passionate sea. The hidden vibrations and song indicate that a transformation is starting to take place.

Stanzas 7—13

In the seventh stanza, the poem makes another shift in action. Up until now, the seven girls have been largely inanimate, having only the power to "appear" or "slide." But in this stanza, the action gets more direct. "The first girl alerted will gather her sisters one by one and tell / them softly about the wounded love moored in the leaves of your / open veins." This first girl suddenly is able to speak, although softly, and she tells her sisters about the "wounded love," a reference to Nature's wounds from the first stanza. In the eighth stanza, the poet says that "The darkest of those appointed sisters" will bring Nature "balsam," or a healing balm, which has "blossomed out of" various negative sources, including "bitter hearts" and "old desecrated cellars." These words invoke images of sorrow and despair, as does the phrase in the next stanza, where the slowest sister "will remake her face with burnt tears." But while this sounds negative, the second part of this stanza notes that these tears are "like a / lovely stone brought to light by patient and precise excavations." So, just as the balsam, a positive healing element, blossomed out of a negative image, the same is true here. In addition, the reference to bringing something to light refers back to the previous stanzas, where the sisters were hidden in shadow. Again, some sort of transformation is taking place.

The tenth stanza continues talking about the slowest sister, who has a "girl of salt" bring Nature baskets from the girl's harvest. At the same time, Nature's tears are weighed, another reference to sadness, especially when they are coupled with the image of "a sinking garden." In the next stanza, Hébert invokes an image of Veronica, the legendary woman who wiped Jesus' face on the way to Calvary, and whose cloth was said to contain Jesus' image. One may ask at this point if the poem is meant to be religious in nature. The direct reference seems to imply so, at least at first. But the poet continues with her nature imagery, even within this reference to Jesus, talking about "large pine sheets" and "water." Also, the poet does not linger on the image of Jesus so one can assume that the reference to Jesus' "tortured face," is merely an example to juxtapose next to the tortured body of Nature. In the next stanza, the poet introduces a "feverish girl" who is also in pain, "stuck with brass thorns," and who "hurries now that night, / risen to its full height, stirs its ripe palms like black sunflowers." As the next stanza

notes, soon night will cover Nature "like a living / oyster where death meditates." At this point, if one reviews the poem, it is clear that up until this stanza, Hébert has been discussing the natural transformation of day to night.

Stanzas 14—22

At this point, however, in stanza fourteen, the poem changes, speeds up, as the poet gets more animated in her addresses to Nature, and gives two descriptions of Nature, both of which invoke the idea of Jesus again. When Nature's face is "hoisted on / the masts of the four seasons," the poet seems to reference Jesus on the cross. Likewise, when Nature is "grating with sand, annointed with pure oils," and "naked," it also invokes an image of Christ before his death on the cross. This powerful image of death, however, is balanced by the promise of resurrection or rebirth, as Jesus is resurrected. Beginning with the next stanza, stanza sixteen, the poet gives several warnings to nature: "Beware of the silent coming of chalk compassions with faces of / mixed clays." The reference to silence reinforces the other silent references in the poem, and the idea of "chalk compassions" implies a false compassion that is dry as chalk. In stanza seventeen, the poet tells Nature to "let the world rush out bound to the / world like an arrow to its arc." As with some of the previous passages, this stanza implies action, and in the case of the world being "bound to the / world," it implies a sense of order. In stanza eighteen, the poet talks about "the altered gift," whose "strange alchemy" is going to "ripen."

This seems confusing until one looks at stanza nineteen, which instructs Nature to "Utter wild things in the sun, name everything facing the tumult / of the great crumbling and irritated dead." Since Hébert states in the preface to *Mystere de la Parole* that she wanted to inspire other Quebec residents to define a new, more specific language for their culture, this makes sense. The process of naming things becomes one of identity, and also creation, an idea that is illustrated with the example of a natural daily cycle of life and death. The last few stanzas demonstrate the difference between the beginning of the poem, in which Nature is subdued and wounded, and the ending. In stanza twenty, "The walls of broken blue glass break like circles of water in the sea." The breaking image, again, implies action, and the fact that walls are breaking is a sign of freedom. In stanza twenty-one, the poet notes that the "heart's very center designs its own supple fence." In other words, in place of the blue glass walls of rigid language that have been restricting Hébert and other residents of Quebec, she instead advocates a "supple fence" that is born out of their passion, which is symbolized by the heart. The final stanza indicates that, when day rises again, it does so "in words like huge poppies / exploding on their stems." Hébert's intent is clear. She wishes to go from the cultural silence in the beginning of the poem, from the hidden culture that her people currently live with, to one that is designed by passion, and which explodes in vital, blossoming words.

Themes

Transformation

The poem's main theme is transformation. In the beginning, the poem talks about "that day," picking one day out of the multitude of days in the natural, daily cycle. This day, as the poem increasingly makes clear, is the day that precedes a new type of day, a day that explodes into being. This is a sharp contrast to the beginning of the poem, where Nature is depicted as a wounded beast, who submits to binding itself to a tree. The concept of binding is significant, because it implies that somebody is a prisoner, or at least does not have freedom of movement. This idea works well with the other concepts that Hébert develops in the poem, such as the use of sounds. In the beginning, all is silent. The Grecian urns placed on top of the sisters' heads are "quiet," as is their processional frieze, during which "They'll slide along the thread of their mauve shadows." At this early point in the poem, all is still silent, still hidden. In stanza five, however, there is a reference to the "cry's stark / space," and in stanza six, the "excessive passion of the sea" which causes it to break out into song. As the poem reaches its close, it has transformed from a silent work to one where Nature utters "wild things in the sun," naming "everything." From a lack of speech to an overabundance, the transformation is complete.

Language

As noted above, the transformation, while on the surface framed in natural terms, is really one of language. In the beginning, the language, like the symbolism, is sorrowful. Nature is wounded, the seven sisters do not have definite movements, merely appearing or sliding, and everything is described in dismal terms that underscore this idea of sorrow. This use of nonspecific language mimics the nonspecific language of Hébert's Quebec when she was writing the poem. The girls cannot move in any definite ways until the poet gives them the language to do so. Until that time, they will only be able to "slide along the thread of their" shadows. But in stanza seven, the language does begin to change, when the first girl is "alerted," a word that implies awareness. She springs into action, gathering "her sisters one by one." She will "tell / them softly about the wounded love moored in the leaves of your / open veins." The wounded love is the current, nonspecific Quebec language, which is moored in "open veins." Until the sisters begin to bring the "balsam," which has "just / blossomed out of bitter hearts" and "old desecrated cellars," which are themselves negative signs, Quebec residents are doomed to go on through the normal daily cycle. In these days, the poet is saying, the day is filled with negative images and silence, because Quebec culture is trapped within a language that is nonspecific. Yet, the end of the poem gives hope for a new Quebec language and culture: "Called for a second time, day rises in words like huge poppies / exploding on their stems."

Style

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. In Hébert's poem, she relies on universal symbols, such as birth, death, and the seasons. At the beginning of the poem, the day is born, and Nature starts out as a "bloody beast." While blood is used as the symbol for many different concepts, in this case, Hébert is depicting the painful birth of Nature at the beginning of the day. This contrasts with night, which is traditionally associated with death: "Soon she'll place her hands tightly over your eyes like a living / oyster where death meditates, centuries of perfect dreams, the / white blood of a hard pearl." A pearl is a universal symbol for beauty and perfection, which ties into the next stanza that discusses "the beauty of your face." This stanza also discusses the seasons: "Oh you trembling in the wind, the beauty of your face hoisted on / the mast of the four seasons." The invocation of the seasons also implies the idea of transformation, since the daily cycle (morning to night) and the annual cycle (spring to winter) are often equated, in a symbolic sense.

Historical Context

When Hébert wrote "The Alchemy of Day," a poem about transformation and new life, Canada was going through its own transformation, much of which centered around Hébert's home territory of Quebec. To understand the tension in 1960, however, it helps to examine Canada's history over the last two centuries. For much of the nineteenth century, during its frontier days, Canada was still referred to as British North America□a collection of colonial provinces that was under British sovereignty. It was not until the 1860s, and the Confederation movement, that Canada became one, united political region. In 1867, Britain, wishing to rid itself of its expensive colonies, passed the British North American Act, which officially severed the country's control of British North America and created the Dominion of Canada, a political entity that was only loosely affiliated with Britain.

Still, while Canada was united in theory, in practice it was a different story, especially in the newly named province of Quebec (formerly Canada East), which paid homage to both its English and French heritage. Quebec made both English and French its official languages, and, through the Canadian government, established a dual school system that included separate schools for English-speaking and French-speaking students. In the twentieth century, Quebec began to grow economically, in part due to a conversion from a mainly agrarian to an increasingly industrial society. The province experienced the greatest industrial growth during the second industrial revolution, which took place between 1920 and 1940. As with the United States and other countries in the late 1920s and 1930s that were affected by the Great Depression, Canada's economy declined. In Quebec, Maurice Duplessis came to power during the 1930s, and his government promoted a return to an agrarian society. Although the movement was unsuccessful, the government made agriculture and the rural life its economic focus.

Even in the later 1940s, after World War II, when Canada as a whole embraced urbanization, Duplessis's government continued to emphasize the rural life, and turned away from urbanization. In the 1950s, the tide began to turn, as farms were urbanized, and industries began to grow again. In 1959, Duplessis died, and the following year, 1960, when Hébert wrote her poem, Quebec entered a period of change referred to as the Quiet Revolution. This revolution witnessed enormous economic growth, as well as a call by the predominantly French-speaking residents of Quebec to define their culture. This focus on preserving cultural heritage, coupled with the strong economy, helped to fuel a separatist movement that sought to have Quebec secede from Canada and become its own, self-governing territory.

Critical Overview

Although she is widely regarded in Canada as one of her country's greatest twentieth-century writers, Hébert has received very little critical attention in the United States or elsewhere. There are many reasons for this. First, most of her poems were published in French. Even though some have been translated into English, they were not widely available until the late 1990s, when collections such as *Day Has No Equal But Night: Poems* were published. Also, as Lorraine Weir notes in her entry on Hébert for *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Hébert's "refusal to be bound by the concerns of the moment," instead writing a collection of diverse, experimental works, "constitutes a challenge which has not yet been fully taken up by Quebec critics and a work hardly begun by those in English-speaking Canada."

Weir also notes that many English-speaking audiences had never heard of the poet until the film adaptation of one of her novels, *Kamouraska*. As Weir notes, this film "has, more than any of her other works, made Hébert known to an English-speaking audience." Readers who like the novel and decide to investigate Hébert's other works can be surprised, as Weir notes that "the isolation of this novel from the body of Hebert's work as a whole has perhaps cast it in a curious light for some readers."

Other critics, such as F. M. Macri, in his article on Hébert in *Canadian Literature*, note the poet's views on life, which suffuse her poetry: "From her earliest poems, we observe the author's nascent vision of life and existence as a closed space containing no time but the past." Macri also discusses the late period of the author's career, noting that her "late poetry is an affirmation of freedom and new life." This was also the period during which the author published "The Alchemy of Day" in a collection titled *Mystere de la Parole* (*Miracle of the Word*), a work that Macri says turns away from the themes of isolation and solitude that had characterized the author's earlier works. Instead, Macri notes that "All the closed spaces of the Self are opened up by the destruction of the symbols of isolation and solitude." Macri is also one of the few critics who discuss "The Alchemy of Day," which he notes is one of many titles in the book that "convey the feeling of transformation."

Other critics have noted the transformational nature of *Miracle of the Word*. For example, in Jean-Cleo Godin's 1970 article in *Yale French Studies*, the critic notes that this volume was for Hébert "the sign of a completely renewed poetics, based essentially on a restoration of the poetic word as the poet consciously accepts a mission of redemption." This mission, which Godin discusses, and which Hébert addresses in her preface to *Miracle of the Word* is to define and specify the language of her native Quebec. As Godin notes, the indefinite, imprecise quality of this language "prevents the people of Quebec from asserting itself and possessing its own land."

In her 1999 essay in *Traditionalism, Nationalism, and Feminism: Women Writers of Quebec*, Susan L. Rosenstreich notes that in Hébert's collection she is following the path of other female poets, who "Rather than abjectly accept received ideas . . . actively seeks and makes audible a voice from the earth we consider mute." This quote seems

to apply to poems such as "The Alchemy of Day," in which the earth is, ultimately, given a voice.

Reviewers of Hébert's 1994 collection, which included poems from *Miracle of the Word*, tended to focus more on the overall quality of the poems. As Sarah Lawall notes in her review of the book for *World Literature Today*, "one is struck again by the precision, clarity, and fine attention to emotional tone in Hébert's work." Likewise, the *Publishers Weekly* reviewer says that the poems are "expansive□rich in vocabulary, ecstatic and imperative in tone." So, even though Hébert has not found a wide audience outside of her native Canada, the response she has received has been overwhelmingly positive.

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 Hébert's use of colors in the poem.

One of the most noticeable aspects of Hébert's poem, "The Alchemy of Day," is its vivid imagery. The poet utilizes a number of image systems, including nature imagery, images of death, and images of Jesus. One of the most striking image systems that Hébert employs is that of color. Colors, in general, are very symbolic, and much has been written about the psychological effect of various colors on humans. Some belief systems, such as feng shui, for example, place immense importance on specific colors. For Hébert, colors are also important in the poem because they serve as a tool to help her achieve the goal that she notes in the preface to *Mystere de la parole*, and which critics such as Jean-Cleo Godin refer to. In his 1970 article in *Yale French Studies*, Godin notes that Hébert "begins by criticizing language (*langue*) which has been as humiliated as the people who speak it, for without this, there can be no language (*langage*) of true meaning." In this environment of meaningless language, Hébert's deliberate use of colors underscores the need for change in Quebec.

"The Alchemy of Day" is a poem saturated with color. But Hébert does not just include colors to make the poem more vibrant. In fact, she uses color in three distinct ways in the poem. First of all, she uses colors that mimic the natural daily cycle in the poem, from day to night. She does not do this in an overt fashion, however, such as depicting the sky changing colors. Instead, in each of the first four stanzas, she emulates this passing of day by including increasingly bright colors. The poem starts out with the "bloody beast," which the poet notes is going to be bound "to the black pine's low branches." Hébert did not have to specify that the pine is a black pine. She could have chosen any other tree she wanted, but her choice of this particular tree is telling. At the beginning of the daily cycle, when day is first created, it is born out of the darkness, or blackness, of night. In the second stanza, the poet says not to "warn the girls / with violet hearts." On a color scale, going from dark colors to light colors, violet is lighter than black. Again, this suggests the type of lightening that happens when night begins to turn into day. The sky does not become light all at once. Instead, it slowly shifts through the color scale as the sun rises and brightens the landscape.

From violet, Hébert next discusses the girls with "blue pities in / quiet amphorae hoisted on their hair." Again, the pattern holds true. Blue is lighter than violet. Finally, the "mauve shadows" in stanza four are lighter than the "blue" from stanza three. In the next stanza, though, the poet deviates from her pattern, by discussing "the girls with green felt feet." On a normal spectrum, green is darker than mauve. But green is not one of the colors commonly associated with the sky, so it would make no sense for Hébert to include it in her four-stanza montage of lightening colors. Also, the stanza in which the color green shows up indicates that day has already risen, by the mention of the "sun," which mows the "soft meadow." Through the first four stanzas, the day is going through its morning cycle, with darker colors yielding to lighter ones, until the sun is up and shining down on

the green grass. From this point on in the poem, Hébert does not mention color until night "risen to its full height, stirs its ripe palms like black sunflowers."

This is an interesting juxtaposition of images. Normally, as stated above, black is associated with night, or darkness, so it seems odd that the poet includes "sunflowers," especially black ones, since sunflowers are usually yellow. This leads to the second way in which Hébert uses color in the poem□as symbols. Every color has symbolic meaning, and when poets and other writers use color in their works, they often tap into these universal meanings. For example, in addition to night, black is also commonly associated with death, since the dark hours of the day□and the dark months of the year□become a kind of symbolic natural death. So when Hébert talks about night having "ripe palms like black sunflowers," she is reversing the traditional symbolism. Ripe is a word that implies fertility, and night is not usually associated with fertility. Also, black is a symbol of death, while flowers are a symbol of life. Hébert is saying that, in the daily cycle, black night is fertile, because it gives birth to day.

In fact, the description in the next stanza that describes how night is going to cover Nature is written in positive terms: "Soon she'll place her hands tightly over your eyes like a living / oyster where death meditates, centuries of perfect dreams, the / white blood of a hard pearl." Death as meditation is not a scary image, and neither is having centuries of perfect dreams. The white pearl also has symbolic meaning. Both white and pearls are associated with purity, so Hébert is again highlighting the daily cycle, which begins fresh and pure each day. In stanza fifteen, the poet makes a commentary on color itself, talking about the "miracles of agile color." As noted above, the colors in the beginning half of the poem are agile. They shift from dark to light and back to dark again, ending with the pure image of a white pearl.

In stanza sixteen, Hébert begins using color in a third way, to underscore the importance of naming things. In her 1999 essay "Counter-Traditions: The Marginal Poetics of Anne Hebert" in *Traditionalism, Nationalism, and Feminism: Women Writers of Quebec*, Susan L. Rosenstreich notes the following: "In Hébert's poetic mystery, naming each object simultaneously attaches it to all other objects, assigns it a place in relationship to, and in context with, all other objects." In stanza sixteen, Hébert offers a warning about "the silent coming of chalk compassions with faces of / mixed clays." This dreary image, which invokes the silence from the beginning of the poem, warns the poet's readers not to forget the importance of having their own, vibrant language, where they can name things themselves. As Godin notes, "Thus poetic speech, in the work of Anne Hébert, serves to clarify the thought of her countrymen, but by awakening it and provoking it; this is why her words are 'creative.'"

Indeed, in stanza seventeen, Hébert seems to try to empower her Quebec readers, telling them to "Poise the green against the blue, and, possessor of power, don't be / afraid of ochre and purple." Through the use of an obscure, specific color like "ochre," the poet is communicating the message that Quebec needs its own language that can be this specific. And once her countrymen have absorbed this message and created this new, specific language, Hébert notes that day will rise "in words like huge poppies / exploding on their stems."

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The Alchemy of Day," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Topics for Further Study

Hébert is one of many artists who initially believed that renunciation of pleasure was necessary for artistic purposes. Research another artist who has practiced this asceticism and write a short essay arguing how this influence showed in the artist's work.

The author uses many colors in her poem to set a mood. Choose three to five colors and conduct a small survey to discover people's associations with these colors. Record your results on a chart and write a brief summary of your findings.

The poem has a great deal of imagery, including some Christ-related imagery. Choose a symbolic image from a work of visual art and create your own collage to reflect this image.

Research other societies, from any era, that have tried to secede from a greater political body, as Quebec tried to do around the time Hébert wrote the poem. Compare this situation to the situation in Quebec.

In the collection that includes "The Alchemy of Day," Hébert makes a case for defining Quebec's language, which she thinks is indefinite and imprecise. Research the idea of language as it relates to a culture's identity. Write a report based on your findings, including your own opinions about how important you think language is to cultural identity.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Separatists groups who wish to form an independent Quebec gain attention for their efforts.

Today: Several Canadian laws passed in the late 1990s make it difficult for Quebec to secede from Canada. In addition, polls show that support for secession has dropped to below half of Quebec voters.

1960s: French and English are both the official languages of Quebec.

Today: As of 1974, French is the only official language of Quebec, and the majority of citizens speak French.

1960s: Although most of Canada operates solely under the provisions of the nation's 1867 constitution, Quebec observes special constitutional considerations designed to preserve its language and heritage.

Today: Although most of Canada operates solely under the provisions of the nation's 1982 constitution, Quebec has refused to sign the document, claiming that it does not address the province's specific cultural needs. Quebec retains several distinct aspects that are influenced by its French-speaking heritage, including a different civil code and separate schools for French-speaking and English-speaking students.

What Do I Read Next?

In "The Alchemy of Day," Hébert talks of a Quebec culture that has been repressed. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), bestselling Canadian author Margaret Atwood depicts a future American society where religious fundamentalism holds sway and women live repressed lives and are subservient to men.

In the poem, Hébert changes from the style of her earlier poems, which glorified solitude, and advocates speaking out, which she does through a nature analogy. In Wendell Barry's *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979—1997* (1999), the poet focuses on the theme of solitude, detailing pastoral images of country life.

While "The Alchemy of Day" explores the renewal of life through language, Hébert's 1980 novel *Héloïse* explores the undead through the use of a protagonist who is a vampire.

Dance of the Happy Shades (1968), the first book of popular Canadian author Alice Munro includes many stories about coming of age in a small Canadian town. Several of the female narrators possess characteristics that keep them isolated from others in their communities.

In *The Practice of the Wild: Essays* (1990), Pulitzer Prize—winning poet Gary Snyder offers essays that discuss his interests in language, his spiritual beliefs, and his respect for nature.

Further Study

Benson, Eugene and William Toye, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, Oxford University Press, Second Edition, 1997.

This helpful reference book includes entries on all major aspects of Canadian literature. It also has sections that specifically focus on works by writers in Quebec, including Francophone writers.

Bickerton, James, ed., *Canadian Politics*, Broadview Press, Third Edition, 1999.

Collectively, this book of essays examines all of the pertinent issues in Canadian politics, including social movements, institutions, specific political regions, and Canada's global relations.

Joseph, John, *Language and Identity: National, Cultural, Personal*, Palgrave McMillan, 2003.

This textbook offers an overview of the role of language in identity. The book includes specific cases from around the world.

Lecker, Robert and Jack David, eds., *Annotated Bibliography of Canada's Major Authors: Marian Engel, Anne Hebert, Robert Kroetsch, and Thomas Raddall*, G. K. Hall, 1988.

This useful resource can help students to identify available sources on Hébert, as well as other major Canadian authors.

Pallister, Janis L., ed., *The Art and Genius of Anne Hebert: Essays on Her Works, Night and the Day Are One*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001.

Pallister's book is a rare collection of Hébert criticism in print. Half of the book's essays appear in French. The book focuses mainly on Hébert's prose works, but it also discusses general aspects of her writing.

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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 memberseducational 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.

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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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