All I Was Doing Was Breathing Study Guide

All I Was Doing Was Breathing by Mirabai

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

The sixteenth-century Indian poet Mirabai was a controversial figure during her lifetime. She was revered by many, but others regarded her as dangerous because she rebelled against the narrow social codes of her day, particularly those relating to gender roles. Her most controversial act was refusing either to immolate herself or to live the circumscribed life of a widow upon her husband's death. Instead, she devoted herself to worship of the god Krishna.

In □All I Was Doing Was Breathing,□ Mirabai describes what may have been one of her first encounters with Krishna, who is one of the best-loved gods in Hinduism. Although she writes in a way that suggests a meeting of human lovers, the relationship is, in fact, a spiritual one, conducted between the individual soul and God. Mirabai's experience of Krishna had such a powerful effect on her that she cast aside her former life completely, believing that she could not live for a moment outside the presence of the god. The exact date of composition of □All I Was Doing Was Breathing□ is unknown. A modern version of the poem is in *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems* (2004), a book that contains fifty poems attributed to Mirabai, which are freely translated by Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Indian

Birthdate: 1498

Deathdate: 1546

Mirabai (sometimes written as Mīrā Bāī) was a sixteenth-century Indian saint, poet, and devotee of the god Krishna. Devotion to Krishna is at the heart of □All I Was Doing Was Breathing.□ The facts of her life that can be established beyond doubt are few, and traditional accounts of her life are embroidered with many legends. Mirabai was born into a minor royal family in Merta, in northwestern India, in approximately 1498. It is probable that her mother died when she was very young and that she was raised by her grandfather, Rao Duda, in a spiritual and devotional atmosphere. When Mirabai was still in her teens, possibly in about 1516, she married Bhoj Raj, a crown prince of the neighboring kingdom of Mewar.

Bhoj died of wounds received in battle five years later, in 1521. But instead of following the Hindu custom of immolating herself, or burning herself, on her husband's funeral pyre, Mirabai embraced her widowhood and dedicated her life to worshipping Krishna, the god to whom she had been devoted since childhood. This refusal to follow the traditional custom upset her late husband's family. According to one legend, they sent Mirabai a basket of flowers with a deadly cobra inside, but when Mirabai saw the snake, it turned into a small statue of the god Vishnu. Another legend has it that her husband's family demanded that she drink poison in front of them; she drank it but remained unharmed.

Undeterred by the opposition she faced, Mirabai continued her public singing and dancing in praise of Krishna. The more traditional elements in society found her behavior shocking, particularly for a woman from an aristocratic family. At some point, Mirabai returned to her childhood home of Merta. For a while, her life appears to have been peaceful, but according to some accounts, she faced more persecution from her uncle, who had taken power in the kingdom following the death of Mirabai's father in battle. Mirabai left Merta and seems to have spent some time in her thirties as a wandering ascetic, or holy person. She eventually traveled to Vrindavan, a sacred city associated with Krishna. While in Vrindavan, she met a renowned holy man, Jiva Goswami (1486-1533), and stayed in close touch with him. In about 1542, Mirabai left Vrindavan for Dwarka, another city in which the worship of Krishna was well established.

During her lifetime, Mirabai composed many untitled devotional songs and poems to Krishna in Hindi. These are known as *padas* and *bhajans*. Scholars do not know how many poems she composed, since she made no effort to preserve them. Some 450 years later, there are as many as 1,300 poems attributed to Mirabai, but it is likely that Mirabai herself composed only a fraction of those, perhaps between 100 and 200. The

others were written by her followers in similar style and form. She is revered in India and has had an enormous influence on the culture of the country.

Mirabai remained in Dwarka until a delegation of priests from her late husband's family arrived to take her back to Rajasthan, threatening to fast to death if she refused to accompany them. According to legend, Mirabai asked permission to consult with Krishna in the temple. She entered the temple and was never seen again, because in her devotion she had been absorbed with the image of Krishna. Mirabai's death is usually considered to have occurred in 1546, although some scholars consider 1547 or 1550 to be a more likely date.

Plot Summary

In the first line of □All I Was Doing Was Breathing,□ the poet explains that she has been, so to speak, taken hold of by a force she identifies at first only as □something.□ The process is mysterious. The □something□ actively reaches out and seemingly absorbs into itself some essence of the speaker that emanates, or radiates, from her eyes (□the beams of my eyes□). The light from the eyes is presented as a tangible, or concrete, thing that can be taken in by another being. Some as yet unspecified spiritual exchange has been accomplished.

In the second line, the poet reveals how she longs for this □something,□ although she does not say, □I have a longing,□ Her phrase, □There is a longing,□ is impersonal, which suggests that the desire may be more universal than the desire of one individual. This longing may be part of the fabric of life in which the finite creature longs for contact with and absorption in the infinite.

In this line, the poet also makes it clear that the object of her longing is the god Krishna, who is traditionally known as the □dark one□ and is depicted in pictorial representations as having dark skin, like the color of a rain cloud. Thus, the poet longs for every hair of his □dark body.□ The image is a very physical one, suggesting the physical intimacy of lovers, but the poet intends this in a spiritual sense. The poet wants to know the divine intimately, in all its manifold aspects.

In line 3, the poet emphasizes her own passivity, as if what happened to her was none of her own doing: □All I was doing was being.□ It was the god who took the initiative and came calling on her or at least passed by her house. Another interpretation of this phrase might suggest, however, that the poet was well prepared to receive the divine; she was in a state of spiritual readiness, in which she was simply aware of □being,□ to the exclusion of all sense impressions and physical or mental activities. In this line, Krishna is described as the □Dancing Energy.□ The image suggests the subatomic world revealed by modern physics, in which subatomic particles interact in a ceaseless flow of energy. Some have likened this view of the world to Indian spiritual thought, in which there is one underlying reality behind all the changing forms of life.

In line 4, the poet says that Krishna was smiling as he passed her house. She saw his face in profile, and she says that it looked like the moon. This unusual image conveys the idea of Krishna's cosmic dimension. Although he lived a life on the earth, he is also the lord of the universe. In Hindu scriptures, Krishna is presented as containing everything in the universe within himself, including the sun and the moon. A simpler interpretation of this line, however, would be that Krishna's face sheds light, like the moon.

The poet explains in line 5 that her family is worried about what they see as her excessive devotion to Krishna. They warn her not to see him again. Perhaps they are concerned that she will neglect her worldly duties and bring dishonor on the family. They whisper about her, perhaps implying that she is mad.

The poet dismisses her family's concerns in line 6. The family has no control over her, because she is now living in a different dimension of life, in which the old rules do not apply. Such rules even seem absurd, something to be laughed at. The poet as devotee has her eyes firmly fixed on the divine, and this is her life now.

In line 7, she shows how confident she is in her new life and understanding. She does not care what others say about her; she is strong enough to bear any burden, because she has surrendered her life to the Dark One.

The poet implies in line 8 that she has no choice now. Her entire existence depends on the god. Describing Krishna as □the energy that lifts mountains,□ she knows that he is the foundation of her life. The reference is to one of the stories about Krishna's childhood. As a boy, Krishna persuaded the people in the village of Vrindavan, which was suffering from a drought, to stop offering prayers and sacrifices to Indra, the god of the heavens who was responsible for rainfall. This angered Indra, who caused torrential rain to fall for countless days on the village. Rivers burst their banks, houses collapsed, and the whole village turned into a lake of mud. Krishna saved the people from drowning by holding up the Goverdhana mountain with his little finger and using it to protect the villagers from the rain. After seven more days of rain, during which the entire village kept dry under the mountain, Indra relented, and the storm ceased. In the original Hindi, the name given to Krishna at this point in the poem is *Giridhara*, which comes from two Sanskrit words meaning □hill□ and □holding.□ According to A. J. Alston in *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai*, the word □means 'He who held aloft the Mountain.'□

Themes

Spiritual Devotion

The poet writes within the Hindu tradition of bhakti, which represents the devotional path to union with God. Bhakti is an attitude of the heart rather than the mind, of feeling rather than intellect. In the bhakti tradition, devotees surrender themselves completely to God, the object of their devotion, and God responds by allowing them to share his infinite love and his infinite consciousness. (Alston points out that in Sanskrit, □the word 'bhakti' comes from the root 'bhaj,' meaning 'to share.'□) For devotees, loving commitment to God is absolute and total; it is more important than anything else in life. Motivated by love, the devotees lose their individual selves in order to find themselves in God, the universal consciousness. They are like small rivers of love that flow to the vast, eternal ocean of pure and universal love, where they find their fulfillment. In the ocean of God-consciousness, they are one with God; there are no longer any distinctions between God and the devotees. For the devotees, their path of love and devotion is one of ever-increasing joy and bliss, and they feel in their hearts that they cannot live for a moment without the presence of the divine.

The poem gives the impression that it is recording the very first time in which the poet was caught up and embraced by the divine. It carries a note of surprise, as if the poet was overwhelmed by some irresistible force that came to her suddenly and unexpectedly, without any doing on her part. This is conveyed first in the title, □All I Was Doing Was Breathing.□ (Mirabai's poems were untitled; this title is supplied by Robert Bly, who adapted the poems.) The same effect is echoed in line 3, in the phrase □All I was doing was being.□ These two similar phrases convey the idea that the divine might make itself known at any moment in a person's life, whether the person is preparing for it or not. Perhaps significantly, the incident did not happen in a temple, where the presence of the god might be expected, but in a seemingly chance moment, in the street outside the poet's house.

□All I was doing was breathing□ and □All I was doing was being□ might also, however, carry another meaning, quite different from the notion that the poet was merely going about her daily business when the god, suddenly, chose to make himself known to her. These two phrases could suggest that the poet was in a state of spiritual readiness, in which she was receptive to the influx of the divine □energy.□ She was not distracted by any activity of body or mind. She was not engaged in the activities of the senses. In a passive, simple state of being, a kind of emptiness, she was ready to experience the fullness of the god.

Spiritual Life versus Worldly Life

There is a stark contrast between the call of the spiritual life, in which the poet declares that she is entirely devoted to Krishna, and the demands of family and worldly life.

Choosing the former, the poet rejects the ties of family and custom. Her family's opposition to her seems fierce and is emphasized by the only words in the poem that appear in direct speech (□My family says: 'Don't ever see him again!'□). But the poet is responding to what she sees as a higher calling, one that transcends her duties and responsibilities to family and society. She rejects her culture and upbringing, as contained in all the □rules□ that are laid down for a woman to follow□rules that she now derides as petty and meaningless. Human laws, relationships, and customs are a product of the earthly life, whereas now she is beholden only to the god, who embodies infinity. The ground of the poet's being has shifted from the temporal to the eternal. Behind this notion of transcending human ties in favor of union with the divine is the idea that there is an essential opposition between the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit. All human and worldly pleasures and responsibilities only lead a person away from the divine; they must be cast aside if a person is to gain enlightenment and become permanently at one with the divine consciousness.

Style

Some of the effect of the poem comes from its contrasting images. Line 2 emphasizes the minute aspects of the divine being that the speaker worships; she yearns for □every hair of that dark body.□ In line 4, however, the image of the minute gives way to a vast, cosmic image, of the face of the divine being that is □like the moon.□ By swinging the reader's awareness from the tiny to the immense, the poem conveys the entire range of the divine.

A somewhat similar swing between opposites can be seen in the direct references to the god. Krishna is represented clearly in human form. He possesses a human body, and he walks past the poet's house. But he is also represented in abstract, rather than concrete, terms as the □Dancing Energy,□ which describes not a human form but something more immense and fundamental, the dynamic consciousness that is the underlying reality of all things in the universe. Once again, the reader's awareness switches between a localized point□a human body□and the infinity of the □Dancing Energy.□

The poem also contains significant imagery about eyes and seeing. The poet looks directly at her beloved with her eyes, not through some inner process of contemplation, of considered thought. It is through the beams that emanate from her eyes that the divine takes hold of her. She also sees his face; it is the visual image of him that is important to her, not his speech or anything else about him. And she describes her life now that she is devoted to the divine in terms of her eyes: □my eyes have their own life.□

Historical Context

The God Krishna

Krishna is worshipped by Hindus as an incarnation of the supreme god, Vishnu. Little is known for certain about the historical Krishna, but scholars suggest that he was a spiritual teacher and a member of the warrior caste who fought on the side of the Pandava clan in a great battle recorded in the Indian epic the Mahabharata. Legends grew up about him, and he came to be worshipped as a divine being who took human form. The cult of Krishna goes back to at least the fourth century b.c.e.

There are many legends about Krishna's birth and life. The story goes that Kansa, an evil king, heard a prophecy that he would be killed by the eighth son of Devaki, his sister. Kansa had Devaki's first six sons killed at birth; the seventh was stillborn, and the eighth, who was Krishna, escaped. Krishna, the divine infant, was raised by the daughter of a cowherd, who loved him as her own. Krishna became a mischievous, charming boy, known for playing pranks on the milkmaids (as the young women who tend the cows are called in Hindu tradition), such as stealing their cream and upsetting their milk pails. According to one story, when the girls went bathing in the river, Krishna took their clothes and refused to give them back until the girls came out and showed themselves to him one by one.

As a child, Krishna possessed supernatural powers and was able to rid the country of demons, which won him the love of all the milkmaids. His favorite milkmaid was named Radha, and she became his lover, even though she was a married woman. In later interpretations of this aspect of the myth, the love between Radha and Krishna became an allegory for the love between the individual soul and God. In manhood, Krishna returned to his place of birth and killed his wicked uncle, restoring righteousness to society. He acquired many wives and continued to slay demons.

The spiritual teachings of Krishna are contained in the Bhagavad Gita (meaning □Song of the Lord□). The Gita, one of Hinduism's most sacred and popular texts, was written probably in the second century b.c.e. or later. Krishna gives his teaching to the warrior Arjuna on the battlefield. His teachings include the essence of bhakti, or devotion, promising that if a person is sincerely and intensely devoted to Krishna, Krishna will return that love and grant the devotee spiritual salvation.

India in the Sixteenth Century

Mirabai's birthplace, Merta, was the capital city of the independent and fairly prosperous state of Merta, although it was less powerful than the neighboring state of Mewar, where Mirabai lived after her marriage. (Both states became part of the modern state of Rajasthan.) There was traditionally much rivalry between the two states, and there were also constant internal feuds and dissension within the ruling clans. Because of these

internal conflicts and because these states were often fighting each other, they were ill prepared for the threat posed by the Muslim Turks, who wanted to expand their rule into India.

In 1527, Merta and Mewar managed to put aside their differences and combine to fight the invading Turks, who were led by Bābur. However, the Indian states were defeated in the battle of Khānua, in which Ratan Singh, who is said to be Mirabai's father, was killed. This battle marked the establishment of Muslim rule in India, which was continued by Bābur's son Humāyūn following Bābur's death in 1531. The Mogul Empire was further extended under the rule of Akbar the Great, who reigned from 1556 to 1605, by which time the empire had expanded from Afghanistan across most of northern India.

The Warrior Ideal

Mewar was one of the Indian states that became known for resisting Mogul domination. Its ruling ethos, according to Parita Mukta in her book *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai*, was that of the Rajput, the warrior class. The Rajputs glorified militarism and war. Dying in battle was considered a noble death, and some of the fallen warriors were worshipped as gods by large numbers of the lower classes. One of the reasons Mirabai faced persecution was that she rebelled against the warrior code and everything it involved. As Mukta explains, the society in which Mirabai lived was a patriarchal one, a brotherhood based on concepts of loyalty and honor. Feudal ideas of duty and service to the master and lord were the standards of behavior that held society together. For a woman, this meant accepting the authority of her husband. Since Mirabai, according to the legends, placed her love for Krishna above her duty to her husband and also refused to sacrifice herself on her husband's funeral pyre, she was denounced as a destroyer of the clan, a threat to the entire structure of society. The path of bhakti (devotion) that she followed ignored traditional hierarchies based on caste or gender and created a new type of community founded on shared beliefs and forms of worship.

Critical Overview

Mirabai is one of the leading figures in Indian devotional poetry, a tradition associated with the bhakti religious movement. This type of devotional poetry dates from the sixth century c.e. and flourished particularly between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Other devotional poets from this period include Kabīr, Tulsīdās, and Sūrdās. During her lifetime, Mirabai's songs were preserved through an oral tradition. They were not recorded in writing. This accounts for the fact that it is impossible to identify poems that the historical Mirabai may have composed, since hundreds of poems attributed to her appeared in later centuries. These were written by her followers, in similar style and form. Mirabai has had an immense influence on Indian culture. According to her adapter Robert Bly, □There is no one else exactly like her in the whole history of poetry. . . . Mirabai's genius encouraged thousands of people in her time to compose ecstatic poems and to sing and to dance them.□

Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the movement for Indian independence in the twentieth century, frequently mentioned Mirabai in his speeches and writings and even translated and sang some of her poems when he was jailed in Yervada Central Prison in 1930. Mirabai thus became, through Gandhi, part of the Indian nationalist consciousness, although Mukta argues in *Upholding the Common Life* that Gandhi distorted her message in order to do so.

Mirabai remains a popular and revered figure in India as the foremost of women bhakti poets and saints. According to John Stratton Hawley, in his afterword to *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, □Her story is told from one end of India to the other, and more or less unceasingly in her native Rajasthan.□ At least fifteen films have been made in India about her life, from 1932 to the 1990s, and her life story appears in a popular comic book. Mirabai is also an internationally known figure. Hawley points out that an international conference, held at the University of California at Los Angeles in 2002, hailed her as □Hindu Saint for a Global World.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Bryan Aubrey holds a PhD in English and has published many articles on contemporary poetry. In this essay, he discusses Mirabai's poetry in the context of the bhakti tradition, as exemplified in the teachings of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita*.*

In the fifty adaptations by Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield that appear in their book *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, it is as if Mirabai's poetry attains a new lease on life. □All I Was Doing Was Breathing,□ titled with such subtle resonance by Bly, makes previous English versions of this poem seem flat by comparison. Bly's adaptation is a free one, and indeed the poems are described as □versions□ of Mirabai rather than translations. As John Stratton Hawley points out in his afterword to the book, the word *energy,* which Bly employs twice in different contexts in this poem, does not appear in the original. But, he says, □Robert Bly must have felt that the whole motif of a divine adolescent lifting a mountain ought to suggest the displacement of matter into its dynamic counterpart: E = mc2.□ Hawley suggests this may be □misleading,□ but it may be that the first connection a reader makes regarding the word *energy* is not so much with Einstein's famous equation but with the parallels between subatomic physics and Indian spirituality that have been popularized in books such as Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975).

Physicists now understand that the universe is made up of dynamic patterns of energy created by the interactions of subatomic particles, and this fact has reminded some people of the representations in Hindu mythology of the god Shiva, who embodies the eternal cosmic dance of creation and destruction as the underlying basis of all existence. As Ninian Smart puts it in *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, □Shiva is god of the dance□as Lord of the Dance he dances out the creation of the world . . . as an expression of his exuberant personality.□ Capra identifies the dance of Shiva with □the dance of subatomic matter□ discovered by modern physicists. When Bly has Mirabai describe Krishna as the □Dancing Energy,□ he is drawing on this idea and relying on the reader to make the connection. Bly is untroubled by the fact that it is Shiva, not Krishna, who is portrayed as the cosmic dancer, because the phrase supplies him with the metaphor he wants, which presents the divine as an infinitely dynamic, infinitely powerful mode of consciousness. It is this perception of Krishna that has seized hold of Mirabai in the poem; she has felt the all-attractive power of the god, before which everything else pales in comparison.

It is in the Bhagavad Gita□which for Hindus has an authority not unlike that which the New Testament has for Christians□that Krishna is presented in his most majestic form. In the eighteen short chapters of the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna is no longer the divine child who slays demons and flirts with milkmaids. He is now the all-knowing incarnation of the supreme god Vishnu, □the beginning and the middle / Of beings, and the end as well.□ He describes himself to the warrior Arjuna as □infinite Time□; he is at once death and □the origin of those things that are to be.□ He is the sun and the moon. (The latter is echoed in the image of Krishna's face □like the moon□ in □All I Was Doing Was Breathing.□) Everything that exists can do so only through him; he is the fundamental power in the universe: □I support this entire universe constantly / With a single fraction

of Myself.□ This statement recalls Krishna as the □energy that lifts mountains□ in Mirabai's poem, which itself recalls the story of Krishna as a boy holding up the mountain with his finger.

In book 11 of the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna presents Arjuna with a vision of himself in his fullest glory. In verse 12, the awestruck warrior sees the whole universe as a manifestation of Krishna in dazzling light:

If there should be in the sky

A thousand suns risen all at once,

Such splendor would be

Of the splendor of that Great Being.

The vision, of which this verse forms only a fraction, is so amazing that it makes Arjuna's hair stand on end.

Approximately seventeen centuries later, Mirabai well understood what Arjuna saw on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, where Krishna's communication took place. It is because Mirabai had such a deep understanding of the true nature of her divine lord that she had so little regard for things such as family duty and accepted social roles, which others thought were so important. For Mirabai, their rules were as nothing when compared with the majesty of the god. Krishna offers salvation and incorporation in the oneness of all things; society offers nothing but the dull round of petty obligations, small-minded values, and short-lived pleasures.

It is also in the Bhagavad Gita that Krishna sets out the influential idea of bhakti, that salvation can be attained not only through knowledge but also through devotion. The key passages come toward the end of book 9. In verse 26, for example, Krishna tells Arjuna:

He who offers to Me with devotion

A leaf, a flower, a fruit or water,

That offering of devotion

I accept from him whose self is pure.

In the same book, Krishna promises those who worship with devotion that □They are in Me, and I also am in them.□ Even if a man is evil, if he worships Krishna with □undivided devotion,□ he will be considered virtuous and will go to □everlasting peace.□ In the final verse of the book, Krishna makes a promise to Arjuna:

With mind fixed on Me, be devoted to Me;

Sacrificing to Me, make reverence to Me.

Thus steadfast, with Me as supreme aim,

Thou thyself shalt come to Me.

In Hindu tradition, devotion can take many forms. Krishna P. Bahadur in his book *Mīrā Bāī and Her Padas*, cites a scriptural text that lists nine kinds of devotion, including listening to the praises of the Lord, community singing, remembering God's name (□The name of the Dark One has entered my heart,□ writes Mirabai in □Mira Swims Free□), ritual worship, complete dependence on God (□I can't live without him,□ says Mirabai in □The Dagger□), and self-surrender (□And seeing his beauty, I offered him all that I am,□ Mirabai states in □Not Hiding Not Seeking□). Bahadur cites another scripture in which activities such as keeping company with holy men and saints, cultivating attitudes like simplicity, and being content with what one has and not finding fault in others are also aspects of devotion, as is an expanded perception in which the devotee □see[s] the whole world pervaded by the Divine.□ Devotion therefore involves an all-encompassing orientation of the entire being of a person. It is not possible to be a part-time devotee or a devotee who retains allegiance to anything other than the lord□in this case, Krishna.

In the eyes of the world, the complete immersion of the devotee in the object of his or her love may look like a kind of madness. Indeed, madness is a theme in a number of Mirabai's poems. She is quite direct about how others regard her: □'Mira is insane,' strangers say that. 'The family's ruined'□ (□Ankle Bells□). It is a characterization that does not upset Mirabai in the slightest. In fact, she embraces it, describing herself in several poems as mad. In □The Dagger,□ she tells what happened when Krishna threw a glance in her direction. It felt to her like a thrust with a dagger. She says, □Since that moment, I am insane; I can't find my body. / The pain has gone through my arms and legs, and I can't find my mind.□ In □The Fish and the Crocodile,□ when Krishna's face appears to her, she says, □I forgot about the world and its duties. I went out of my mind.□ The last phrase is especially resonant, since it suggests both madness and a kind of ecstasy.

The word *ecstasy* comes from the Greek word *ekstasis*, which literally means □a being out of its place.□ Religious ecstasy means to stand outside oneself in a state of heightened awareness. It is the great paradox of all mystical literature that in standing outside the ordinary day-to-day self, the devotee or mystic discovers the true self in larger measure. She or he comes home to the god, so to speak, just as Mirabai says, □I'll sing about him; then I will be home□ (□The Gooseberry Patch□). Mirabai has left her material home, in terms of her family and all her worldly ties, and has discovered her spiritual home, in Krishna. She has gone into him □As the polish goes into the gold□ (□Polish into Gold□). In doing so, she has realized the eternal truth of Krishna's words in book 10 of the Bhagavad Gita, that he □abid[es] in the heart of all beings.□ This is clear from her poem □Not Hiding Not Seeking□: □Friends, let those whose Beloved is absent write letters□ / Mine dwells in the heart, and neither enters nor leaves.□ Like all the great seers in all religious traditions, Mirabai has gone beyond the

□world's five fabrics□ (that is, the five senses), as she calls them in □Not Hiding Not Seeking,□ and knows the ultimate, unchanging reality that lies beyond all the shifting phenomena of this world.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on □All I Was Doing Was Breathing,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

Poems of Mirabai (1997) is an audiocassette published by Audio Literature. The poems are read by Robert Bly, David Whetstone, Marcus Wise, Bruce Hamm, Manda Venkata Ramanamma, and Nirmala Rajasekar.

Topics for Further Study

Write your own devotional poem. It does not have to be addressed to a religious figure or to God. You could write such a poem to anyone you love or even to your dog or cat. What is important is the sincerity and depth of the feelings conveyed.

What is meant by the term *Hinduism*? What are the main gods in Hinduism? Is Hinduism a polytheistic religion? Prepare a class presentation on the main elements of Hindu belief, including brief explanations of such topics as reincarnation, karma, and the caste system.

Read as many poems by Mirabai as you can find on the Internet or in books, and explore her life story, including the many legends that surround her life. In what sense might Mirabai in her life and work be considered a role model for women? Write a letter to a friend explaining who Mirabai was and why your friend should read and study her work. Be sure to emphasize two or three main points and support them with reference to Mirabai's life and work.

Read some poems by the medieval Sufi poet Rumi, who is in many ways similar to Mirabai. Prepare a class presentation in which you bring out the similarities and differences between the two poets. What are the characteristic themes of these two poets, and how do they present those themes?

Compare and Contrast

1600s: In India, women have no independent legal rights. They are given in marriage, often to create alliances between royal families. Widows are expected to immolate themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres (a practice known as suttee, in which a widow allows herself to be burned on the pyre), although not all of them do so. Widows occupy very low social status in society. They are required to dress in drab clothes and are shunned by others. Also, they are not allowed to take part in Hindu festivals. Some widows who commit themselves to suttee do so in order to escape being carried off by Muslim soldiers as slaves or concubines.

Today: Many laws exist in India to protect women's rights, including the Equal Remuneration Act, the Prevention of Immoral Traffic Act, and the Dowry Prohibition Act. The practice of suttee is illegal. However, according to a report issued by the U.S. State Department in 2004, the Indian government is often unable to enforce these laws, especially in rural areas in which traditions are deeply rooted. Suttee continues to be practiced in some areas; there was such an incident in Madhya Pradesh in 2002.

1600s: Portuguese, Dutch, and British explorers establish trading posts in India, but Hindu spiritual practices and philosophies are virtually unknown in Europe. This is because Indian scriptures are written in Sanskrit, and translations will not be made until near the end of the eighteenth century.

Today: After some two centuries of dissemination of Indian religious and philosophical ideas in the West, Hinduism and Buddhism are part of the American cultural landscape. Indian gurus popularize meditation techniques adapted from Indian tradition, and the Hindu philosophy of the underlying unity of all things is the bedrock of spiritual beliefs and practices associated with the New Age spiritual movement. In the United States, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, founded in 1965 and known as the Hare Krishna movement, disseminates knowledge of Krishna and his teachings.

1600s: The Mogul Empire grows in India throughout the century and by 1700 extends to most of the Indian subcontinent. Muslim rulers vary in their attitudes to Hindus. In some cases, the Muslims destroy Hindu temples and impose taxes on non-Muslims. But some Muslim rulers display a more enlightened attitude and allow Hindu culture to flourish. There is also interchange between the two religions. Elements of the Hindu caste system enter Muslim society, and Hindus adopt the Muslim practice of purdah (keeping women secluded, away from men or strangers).

Today: India is an independent, predominantly Hindu country, while its neighbors Pakistan and Bangladesh are Muslim. India has a secular government and is the largest democracy in the world. However, tensions exist between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority. The holy city of Ajodhya is a frequent source of religious strife. In 1992, Hindu nationalists tear down a sixteenth-century mosque in Ajodhya. Hindus believe the mosque was built on the site of a temple marking the birthplace of the Hindu deity Lord Rama. In 2002, seventy people are killed in Gujarat province, as Hindu mobs attack

Muslims in retaliation for the firebombing by Muslims of a train carrying Hindu nationalists back from Ajodhya.

What Do I Read Next?

For Love of the Dark One: Songs of Mirabai (1998), translated by Andrew Schelling, includes a short introduction and a glossary. Schelling's translations bring out the passionate and erotic quality in Mirabai's devotion to Krishna.

Rumi: The Book of Love: Poems of Ecstasy and Longing (2003), translated by Coleman Barks, is a collection of poems by the thirteenth-century Sufi poet whose absolute devotion to God resembles that of Mirabai. These poems tell of Rumi's deep desire to lose himself in love for the divine.

The Gift: Poems by the Great Sufi Master (1999) is a collection of poems by Hafiz, translated in colloquial language by Daniel Ladinsky. Like his predecessor Rumi, Hafiz was a fourteenth-century Sufi mystic who wrote short, ecstatic, devotional poems to God.

Kabir: Ecstatic Poems (2004), versions by Robert Bly, is a collection of the verse of a near contemporary of Mirabai. Kabīr (1440-1518) was an important influence in the formation of the Sikh religion. He was a Muslim weaver from Benares, India, who became influenced by Hindu ideas. Kabīr condemned the caste system and disliked the dogmas and rituals that divided one religion from another. He wrote many poems and hymns, and his followers today form a distinct sect within Hinduism. John Stratton Hawley's introduction places Kabīr's work firmly in modern times.

Further Study

Archer, W. G., *The Loves of Krishna in Indian Painting and Poetry*, Dover, 2004.

Archer gives the entire story of Krishna as presented in different historical texts. His purpose is to shed light on Indian paintings that represent Krishna, and he shows why the figure of Krishna is still enchanting to modern Indians. The book includes thirty-nine black-and-white plates.

Bhaktivedanta, Swami, *Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead*, Vol. 1, Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1996.

This is a commentary on the tenth canto of the Srimad-Bhagavatam, which tells the story of Krishna's early life, by the Krishna devotee who founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. The book includes a two-page message from the rock star George Harrison and thirteen color plates showing incidents from Krishna's life in Indian art, including one in which the child Krishna holds up the mountain with one finger.

Hawley, John Stratton, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Times and Ours*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Hawley's study of the literature of bhakti includes four chapters on Mirabai that discuss what is known of Mirabai as a historical figure and how her work has been received from her time to ours. Also included are Hawley's translation and analysis of twenty-two of Mirabai's poems.

Levi, Louise Landes, *Sweet on My Lips: The Love Poems of Mirabai*, Cool Grove Publishing, 1997.

This volume includes translations of Mirabai's poems, a glossary, and several short personal essays by Levi. Among other topics, Levi discusses her own spiritual experiences in studying Mirabai and the bhakti tradition and the art of translation. She also offers musical notation for a Mirabai song in Indian and Western notation.

Rosen, Steven J., ed., *Vaisnavi: Women and the Worship of Krishna*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1997.

This book includes an essay on Mirabai by Andrew Schelling, in which he examines the differences between Mirabai and earlier religious poets. It also contains an essay by A. K. Ramanujan on the lives of women saints in India, including Mirabai.

Taft, Frances, □The Elusive Historical Mirabai: A Note,□ in *Multiple Histories: Culture and Society in the Study of Rajasthan*, edited by Lawrence A. Babb, Varsha Joshi, and Michael W. Meister, Rawat Publications, 2002, pp. 313-35.

Taft analyzes the primary sources and other evidence available that give a picture of the historical Mirabai. She argues against the view held by some that no such person as Mirabai ever existed.

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Bahadur, Krishna P., trans., *Mīrā Bāī and Her Padas*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1998, pp. 34-35.

Bly, Robert, and Jane Hirshfield, eds., *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, Beacon Press, 2004, pp. xi, 3, 4, 8, 9, 12, 16, 18, 19, 57.

Capra, Fritjof, *The Tao of Physics*, Fontana/Collins, 1978, p. 259.

Hawley, John Stratton, Afterword, in *Mirabai, Ecstatic Poems*, translated by Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield, Beacon Press, 2004, pp. 67-68, 91.

Mukta, Parita, *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai*, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 49-66.

Sargeant, Winthrop, trans., *The Bhagavad Gītā*, edited by Christopher Chapple, State University of New York Press, 1984, pp. 396, 402, 405, 406, 407, 410, 420, 443, 444, 449, 452, 464.

Smart, Ninian, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, Fontana, 1970, p. 158.

BOOKRAGS

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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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