Allegory Study Guide

Allegory by Mary Jo Bang

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Since the publication of *Apology for Want* in 1997, the vivid and distinctive poetry of Mary Jo Bang has been praised by critics and readers alike. Her work is characterized by a light rhythm and a playful tone that draw the reader into her unique world of images and sounds. Bang is also recognized, however, as a subtle, intellectual, and crafty poet who addresses ambitious philosophical themes and maintains careful control over the implications of her varied language.

□Allegory,□ originally published in the *Paris Review* but included in the 2004 collection *The Eye like a Strange Balloon*, is a superb example of Bang's balance between playful verse and profound themes. Like the other poems in Bang's collection, it is written in the tradition of *ekphrasis*, in which a poem is highly visual or makes close reference to a work of visual art. Interacting with Philip Guston's 1975 painting of the same name, □Allegory□ brings Guston's imagery to life in a narrative structure and develops a unique reading of the painting's significance. The poem comments on the position of the artist in society as well as other abstract themes, such as mythology, fate, and identity. Playing with quirky language that climaxes at a point of bleak despair, Bang delights readers at the same time as she provokes them to question how artists interact with reality and how humankind approaches death and destruction.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1946

Born in the central Missouri town of Waynesville in 1946, Mary Jo Bang grew up in St. Louis. She went to college at Northwestern University, where she earned a bachelor's degree and then a master's degree in sociology, graduating summa cum laude. Bang also earned a bachelor's degree in photography from the University of Westminster in central London and a master's in creative writing at Columbia University.

Bang's first collection of poetry, the intellectual and allusive *Apology for Want*, was published in 1997 and awarded the Breadloaf Bakeless Prize as well as the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Award. In 2001, Bang went on to publish *The Downstream Extremity of the Isle of Swans*, which won the University of Georgia Press Contemporary Poetry Series Competition. That same year, she published another collection of poetry entitled *Louise in Love*, which received an Alice Fay di Castagnola Award from the Poetry Society of America and is known for its intelligent wordplay. *The Eye like a Strange Balloon*, which includes □Allegory,□ was published in 2004.

An accomplished editor and professor as well as a poet, Bang has been a poetry editor at the *Boston Review* since 1995. She has received numerous awards and fellowships, including a Pushcart Prize, a Discovery/The Nation Award, a Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University, and a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation. Bang lives in St. Louis, where she is a professor of English at Washington University.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-7

□Allegory,□ which is organized into eleven five-line stanzas and a final three-line stanza, begins with the speaker offering to □console□ the reader with music. The speaker's use of the pronoun □us□ implies that there is a group of artists behind the creative effort, as at the bottom of Guston's painting, which lists □composer,□ □painter,□ □sculptor,□ and □poet□ on what appears to be a wave.

In lines 3 through 5, the speaker begins to say that □we□ (probably referring, again, to the categories of artists listed in Guston's painting) are □caught in / this sphere□ (possibly referring to the earth) where it does not matter whether Prometheus hears their song. This sentence continues over the stanza break between lines 5 and 6, which is an example of *enjambment*, a convention in which a phrase continues from one line of poetry to the next.

Lines 8-15

Lines 8 through 11 explain the predicament of Prometheus, a Titan from classical mythology known as a great friend to humankind. After Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans, Zeus punished him by chaining him to a mountain in the Caucasus, where every day an eagle descended and ate out his liver (which would regenerate by night). The speaker alludes to this eagle's biting and clawing into Prometheus's back and how it would ache. Then the speaker claims that □Somatognosis,□ or the awareness of one's own body, is the □sixth sense.□ In lines 14 and 15, the speaker asks what it feels like to □inch one's way forward,□ and it is likely that this line refers to Guston's painting, in which a man seems to be painstakingly moving against a pile of objects that appear to be shoes.

Lines 16-25

The speaker begins the fourth stanza by stating, □these are the questions,□ although it is not entirely clear what the questions are. The speaker then envisions a metaphor, or a comparison in which one object or idea is substituted for another, in which dawn is someone crawling toward knowledge. If □More of us□ refers to the artists mentioned earlier in the poem, the short statements in lines 19 and 20 suggest that poets, composers, sculptors, and painters, described as □the adoring,□ are also □coming,□ presumably toward knowledge.

In the fifth stanza, the speaker moves from these thoughts into a meditation on identity. Comparing each day to a broken tie on a red shoe and a □Who- / do-you-wish-to-be,□ the speaker suggests that each day offers the possibility of tying the shoe in any manner and assuming a variety of roles. It is worth noting, however, that it seems to be

the same □red-leather shoe□ each day. The speaker then states that □we,□ which again could refer to the artists of Guston's painting, will be content with whichever identity □we□ *think* □we□ have, which suggests that the □we□ do not know what this identity actually is.

Lines 26-36

In lines 26 through 29, the speaker seems to be describing what will happen □Tonight,□ when the □we□ drive off, carrying the □Jackself / we might have been□ in the backseat. These lines are important for a number of reasons, including the suggestion that □we□ is literally one or two people, since they are sitting in the front of the car. It is also interesting to note that an alternate identity is included with the □we□ in the car, as though the □we□ comprises both what it is and what it might have been.

Line 30 begins a somewhat mysterious question that is carried over into the seventh stanza, asking the □degree of remove□ between someone or something on top of □Pie Mountain□ versus a □tourist motel□ below with a □pool / of aqua attitude and blue inflatables.□ This question does not seem to make much sense until one examines Guston's painting, in which mathematical objects such as a ruler, sphere, cube, triangle, and the digits 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 are grouped in the upper left, somewhat in the distance. In the foreground are a man with a cigarette and, above his face, a strange blue object or creature that may be what the speaker calls an □inflatable.□

Line 36 then seems to comment on the previous lines with the statement (which is possibly ironic): □Some vigorous enactment.□ This implies that the relationship between whoever is on top of Pie Mountain and whoever is in the tourist motel is an enactment, or an acting out of something. If the statement is ironic (irony occurs when the literal meaning is the direct opposite of the implied meaning), the speaker would be suggesting that the enactment is actually weak and lacking energy.

Lines 37-46

Line 37's question about the time refers to Guston's painting, in which the central male figure's watch has hands of equal length that could be indicating either 3:00 or 12:15. The speaker then says that either time is □only an estimate□ and comments that □Myth,□ which resonates with the title of Bang's poem, is not just □fate□ but □embellishment.□ Since these three lines emphasize that it is difficult to measure or plan time and fate, they highlight Bang's theme of the artist's distance from reality.

In stanza 9, the narrative seems to return to the nighttime car journey mentioned earlier. The □wheel□ that is set in motion in line 41 is another reference to Guston's painting, where what seems to be the wheel of a car is in front of the central male figure's face. Together, lines 41 and 42 comment on the inability to see something fixedly while □our eyes are on the moment.□ In lines 43 through 46, □we□ are driving on four wheels, presumably in the car from stanza 6, to a carnival, where □we□ line up for a ticket. The air is □rife,□ or abundant with, summer, although it is apparently still the nighttime.

Lines 47-58

In lines 47 and 48, a foot lifts from the floor in a motion the speaker describes as □kinesthetic,□ or sensing one's own muscular movements, a concept similar to that of □somatognosis,□ mentioned earlier. This motion □forces itself to be felt,□ which perhaps means that the other, somewhat vague beings or identities in the car can feel it. It may also suggest that the driver has taken his or her foot off the pedal and the car is coming to a stop.

The actors mentioned in line 50 may refer to the artists listed at the bottom of Guston's painting, and once again they are portrayed as observers somewhat distanced from reality. They observe □minutiae,□ or trivial details, that are □sutured,□ or stitched, to the □spine of the climax.□ This intriguing description is somewhat vague and abstract, but it may refer to the pile of objects at the lower right of Guston's painting. In any case, the artists are looking at this climax, which is also the climax of the poem itself, when someone opens the car door □on the side of despair / and looks out onto death / and destruction.□ The nature of this death and destruction is not specified, nor is it clear why one side of the car faces □despair.□ Once again, however, Bang is very likely referring to the everyday, but also rather bleak and disturbing pile of objects in Guston's painting, from which the four types of artists are firmly separated.

Themes

Art and the Artist

□Allegory□ is closely related to Philip Guston's 1975 painting of the same name, and Bang's commentary directly engages with the central themes of the painting. For example, both works provide a self-conscious commentary on the predicament of the artist, including the artist's relationship to reality and society. Bang produces a somewhat unique perspective on Guston's painting, but she follows his lead in analyzing the dilemma of the visual, literary, and musical artist as he or she attempts to approach the world and create art.

Since it includes a scroll that reads □The Artists□ at the top, and what appears to be a wave at the bottom with the words □composer,□ □painter,□ □sculptor,□ and □poet,□ Guston's painting suggests that the figures in the body of the piece are artists at work. Similarly, Bang suggests that the people represented by the pronouns □we□ and □us□ may be artists whose function ranges from □consol[ing],□ to □adoring,□ to producing a □vigorous enactment,□ to looking out □onto death / and destruction.□ As in Guston's painting, the artist figures seem to be facing powerful and overwhelming obstacles; at the climax of the poem, the □actors,□ which again seems to refer to artist figures, stand against a wall and look out through a door of despair. Bang may be commenting on the barrier between the real world and the artist, the difficulty in determining the function of art, and the problems of creating successful artwork.

Myth, Fate, and Allegory

□Allegory□ contains a reference to classical mythology, a commentary on the connection between myth and fate, and a suggestion (because of the title) that it is an allegory, or a story told in symbols that represent the meaning implied by the narrative. These themes are related because they all refer to the ancient tradition of a work of art that contains a hidden message about the fundamental nature of the world.

In the second stanza, Bang makes reference to Prometheus, the titan (a race of immortal gods that preceded Zeus's generation) from ancient Greek mythology known as the benefactor of humankind. This allusion establishes that Bang is interested in connecting her poem to the tradition of classical mythology, and it makes her poem appear to be commenting on timeless philosophical themes. For example, after discussing Prometheus, the speaker makes the abstract claim □These are the questions.□ Then, in stanza 8, the speaker notes that time in Guston's painting is □only an estimate,□ which inspires another general and abstract claim: □Myth equals fate / plus embellishment.□

Claims such as these are not technically allegorical, since they state precisely the deeper meaning that would be implied by the symbols of a true allegory. The title of the

poem seems misleading, therefore, unless it is simply a reference to Guston's painting. However, Bang's poem could be commenting on the very concept of allegory, in the sense that she describes an event or refers to an aspect of Guston's painting and then provides a literal explanation of its allegorical meaning. In fact, in elements of the poem such as the final description of □death / and destruction,□ Bang seems to be playing with the idea that there is a potential to make a grand or timeless commentary on the world. This is because those looking out at this death and destruction, who presumably represent artists, can see only □the minutiae□ connected to the crux of the event instead of its full allegorical significance.

Identity

Another one of Bang's major themes in □Allegory□ is her discussion of the notion of identity and selfhood. The idea that □Tonight we'll be content / with whomever we think we are□ implies that it is difficult or impossible to discover one's true identity, as does the statement that every day is a □Who-do-you-wish-to-be?□ It is likely that Bang's commentary on identity is concentrated on artistic identity, however, since it refers to the main subject of Guston's painting. Indeed, Bang continually emphasizes that the artist has difficulty determining who he is as well as how he fits into the world and creates art. She even seems to refer to artists as □actors□ in the tenth stanza, implying that their role as observers of society makes it difficult to determine how they fit into the world.

Style

Ekphrasis

Bang's most important technique in □Allegory□ is her use of the convention of ekphrasis, which refers to poetry concerned with the visual, particularly the visual art of painting. Often, an ekphrastic poem will take a work of visual art as its subject and describe or illuminate the visual elements of this work in literary terms. Bang's entire collection *The Eye like a Strange Balloon* is based on ekphrasis, and each of its fifty-two poems takes a work of art as its subject. □Allegory□ is based on Philip Guston's painting of the same name, although, as is typical of Bang's use of ekphrasis, the poem does not simply explicate or depict Guston's painting but uses it as a starting point to explore Bang's own themes.

Alliteration

Bang is known for her use of repeated vowel and consonant sounds, particularly the technique of alliteration, which refers to the repetition of initial consonant sounds. The *c* sound in the line □The door of the car will click-close□ is an example of this technique, as is the repetition of the *d* sound in the last words of the final four lines of the poem□□despair,□ □death,□ and □destruction.□ In addition to its usefulness as a musical and rhythmical device, alliteration allows Bang to draw attention to certain words and connect their meanings.

Enjambment

Bang frequently makes use of the technique of enjambment, which occurs when the meaning of one line of verse runs over into the next line. In fact, several of Bang's phrases run across stanzas, emphasizing the sense of continuation through a longer visual blank space in the poem. Enjambment can be useful for a variety of reasons, from moving along the action to emphasizing the space, or lack of space, between words in a continuous phrase. In □Allegory,□ Bang often contrasts a short, end-stopped line, or a line whose meaning does not carry over to the next line, such as □Music's the answer,□ with the five lines that flow on after it in an example of extended enjambment. Because of this technique, short declarative phrases, such as □All of the adoring,□ receive more emphasis.

Playfulness and Irony

With its story that is difficult to follow literally and its variety of subtle and ambiguous remarks, □Allegory□ can be described as both playful and ironic. Irony is a device in which language implies the opposite of its literal meaning, and the best example of irony in Bang's poem is the phrase □Some vigorous enactment,□ since it implies that the

enactment is not vigorous at all. Bang's playfulness is evident in the first stanza, when the speaker asks to □Let us console you□ with music but goes on to suggest that it does not matter what happens to this music. Here, as in many of the allusions to Guston's painting, it is not entirely clear what the speaker is talking about, and Bang seems to be teasing readers' expectations and challenging their interpretation of the poem and the painting.

Historical Context

Contemporary American Poetry

The contemporary American poetry scene is diverse and varied, and no one movement or poetic school dominates the literary scene. Many poets of the early twenty-first century, however, are influenced either directly or indirectly by the artistic movement of postmodernism, which began in the years following World War II. Known for challenging fixed understandings of reality, postmodern theory suggests that the world is composed of infinite layers of meaning. Psychoanalysts such as Jacques Lacan were among the key early figures to challenge previous standards in psychological, philosophical, and linguistic thought by questioning the commonly held belief that human psychology operates in a structured symbolic universe. In literature, postmodern theory has challenged writers to think about the form and meaning of texts as variable, or not confined to one particular perspective. Many poets have been particularly influenced by the theories of Jacques Derrida, who developed a critical method called □deconstruction,□ which stresses that texts do not refer to reality but only to other texts.

American poetry since the 1980s, therefore, tends not to take for granted that people experience and remember events in a straightforward manner in which symbols correspond to reality. Some poets have made further advances in the surrealist and abstract impressionist traditions, for example, and these traditions were particularly influential over the avant-garde □New York school□ of poetry, which includes intellectual poets such as John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara. Meanwhile, poets such as Billy Collins have attempted to relate the dialect or style of a particular American region or culture, using a direct and conversational voice. Also, the poetry scene in the United States since the 1980s has become increasingly interested in voices from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, especially groups that were marginalized in the past.

Some contemporary American poets have begun to think about history from different, more relativistic perspectives, and some refer to mythology or religion in order to bring out their themes. For example, Louise Glück tends to reinterpret classical mythology as a way to address feminist themes. Other poets, such as Bang, are interested in interacting with diverse artistic, visual, and cultural mediums. Some have stressed the need to reflect advances in computer and film technology in their work, for example, using the convention of fast-forward and rewind to describe a series of events. However, Bang's work in ekphrasis comes from a much longer tradition that stretches back to the classical world. Ekphrasis was particularly popular among romantic poets such as John Keats and Lord Byron, in part because poetry of the romantic era was interested in visionary glimpses of nature and art.

Philip Guston

Born in Canada, Philip Guston (1913-1980) moved to Los Angeles as a child and became friends with his classmate Jackson Pollack, later the leading figure of abstract expressionism in the United States. Guston, largely a self-taught artist, dropped out of the Otis Art Institute in 1930 and began working in the figurative medium, in which painted forms refer to objective, or real, sources. After working on a number of mural projects, Guston began a period of transition to abstract expressionism, a style in which artists express emotional states rather than physical objects, without symbolism or figuration. He became one of America's leading abstract expressionist painters in the 1950s and 1960s, teaching in New York and developing a following, until his style suddenly and dramatically changed back to figurative art in the late 1960s. The symbolic figures he painted during the 1970s, often evoking a bleak and dark side of existence, were controversial and extremely influential over neo-figurative artists. In many of these paintings, including *Allegory* (1975), Guston paints seemingly mundane but representative objects that allow him to engage in symbolism.

Critical Overview

Bang has been an acclaimed poet since the success of her first collection, *Apology for Want*, in 1997. She has a reputation as an intellectual poet who asks major philosophical questions about art and existence, but her lively poetry has a popular appeal as well. *The Eye like a Strange Balloon* was reviewed positively in publications such as *Booklist* and *Publishers Weekly*; in the former, Donna Seaman finds Bang particularly praiseworthy, writing that her fourth collection □is especially commanding in its metaphysical puzzles, tart irony, antic yet adamantly channeled energy, and devil-may-care poise.□ Michael Scharf, meanwhile, discusses what he considers the collection's central theme in his *Publishers Weekly* review, arguing that Bang's poems □search relentlessly for the meaning of□and the reason for□art in our contemporary world.□ Although it has received little individual critical attention, □Allegory□ is one of the noteworthy poems of the collection, having appeared in the *Paris Review* in the fall of 2004.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is an independent scholar with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, he highlights the context of Guston's Allegory *and analyzes its significance in order to discuss the aesthetic commentary in Bang's poem of the same name.*

□Allegory□ is a coherent, visually compelling poem that, in some ways, stands alone. Bang's vision comes to life because of its own imagery, so it is possible to enjoy the poem without a close familiarity with the Philip Guston painting on which it comments. In fact, Bang's themes tend to explore her own interests instead of the artist's, and she certainly does not simply explain or draw attention to Guston's ideas. □Allegory□ very closely and very carefully engages with the painting, however, and to appreciate the deeper resonance of its most important theme□its commentary on art and aesthetics□it is necessary to examine how Bang interprets Guston's work.

Before discussing Bang's particular reading of the painting, it will help to highlight Guston's role in the development of art of the late twentieth century and his self-conscious artistic commentary in *Allegory*. Bang has chosen a painting that makes broad and ambitious claims about the nature of art and engages explicitly with the vehement debate during the 1970s about the direction American art should take. *Allegory* appeared after Guston had famously and controversially disavowed abstract expressionism, at the height of his return to figurative painting. The work rejects the tenets of abstract expressionism, a movement that centers on the importance of free self-expression that does not refer or allude, symbolically or otherwise, to any external objects or events.

Allegory, a prominent example of the kind of symbolic, representational painting that occupied the final stage of Guston's career, appeared at a point when American artists were breaking away from abstract expressionism, which had been such an important and predominant movement a decade earlier. Andy Warhol, for example, had already established himself as a famous leading figure of pop art, a movement that returns to figurative art and incorporates themes and ideas from mass-produced, mass-media culture. Meanwhile, minimalist artists such as Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt had become popular and influential. Unlike pop art, minimalism was not associated with symbolism, figuration, or representation; on the contrary, it often involved sculpted objects that were abstract and referred only to themselves.

American art in the 1970s, therefore, was in the midst of a debate about what art should be. Few artists were still practicing abstract expressionism, but many artists and critics refused to return to figurative, representational work. Abstract art was seen throughout the years after World War II as a liberating, exciting, pro-American practice that opened up an enormous variety of artistic possibilities. Even the Central Intelligence Agency, eager to denounce the □social realist□ art characteristic of totalitarian and Communist regimes such as the Soviet Union, sponsored and promoted abstraction in the arts. As antifigurative movements began to take hold in the 1960s, major American artists'

positions in the controversy were closely watched, particularly in New York City, the locus of the debate, where the key artists lived and worked.

Guston had been one of the leading figures in abstract expressionism and a childhood friend of Jackson Pollack, the leading figure of abstract expressionism. A prominent artist living in New York, he was one of the key converts to the movement, involved in its origins in the 1940s. He was also one of its chief exponents in the fifties and sixties. His sudden conversion in the late 1960s to figurative art, therefore, which included cartoonlike figures, ordinary objects, and highly politicized representations, including Ku Klux Klansmen, shocked the art world. Many claimed that Guston was a traitor to the cause of American art, and his return to figuration was extremely influential over other artists of the period.

Allegory is one of the key paintings of Guston's late period, one that is very much a part of the debate between figuration and abstraction. Because it is so overtly symbolic and allusive; because it involves and interacts with language; and because it even claims, with its title, to contain an implicit, secondary meaning, the painting can be considered a landmark in 1970s figurative painting. The □dilemma□ of the artists depicted in the work is an aesthetic one: how to interact with the world, how to use the tools at hand for artistic production, how go about the struggle of creating art. The two human figures in the painting are confronted with extremely oppressive obstacles to their artistic goals, and Guston gives the impression that they are making little headway against what appears to be a blue wave or a monster, a wheel, an intimidating pile of metal-soled shoes, and an accusatory red finger from the heavens.

Guston is at his most figuratively clear and direct in this painting, actually including words in his work to establish the significance of his images. The fact that a scroll reading □The Artists□ floats above the main body of the work emphasizes that the words □composer,□ □painter,□ □sculptor,□ and □poet□ at the bottom are meant to correspond to the figures in the main body. Although there are paintbrushes and other artists' materials in the foreground, the exact artistic medium in which the central human figures are working is unclear; the important thing to recognize is that there is a divide between two different types of art and two different types of artists. While the bodyless head on the left is associated with abstract and mathematical ideas such as a ruler, geometrical shapes in space, and a sequence of five numbers, the head on the right is working with a pile of specific and real objects (mainly, it appears, shoes). One artist, therefore, is working in abstraction, while the other is working in figuration.

The □dilemma□ of Guston's *Allegory*, therefore, is closely connected to the artist's own dilemma as he attempted to redefine himself in the 1970s American art scene. A number of conclusions can be drawn from Guston's commentary on abstract versus figurative art. The abstract artist is facing the sky, overwhelmed by what appears to be a kind of blue wave or monster, while the figurative artist seems to be much more in the brunt of the artistic process, his face enmeshed in a wheel. The latter is holding a length of rope that trails back to the artistic materials in the foreground, and his hair seems to be melting from the imposing red finger from the heavens. This finger suggests that the figurative artist is somehow chosen by God, or that he is burdened by God, or both.

Bang's poem, which centers on self-conscious themes of aesthetics, identity, and myth, is very aware of the debate between abstraction and figuration. She begins with a suggestion that music has a function of consolation but that it does not matter whether this artistic medium engages with the mythological figure of Prometheus. Prometheus, said to be the figure responsible for giving the power of artifice to humankind, is then associated with □Somatognosis,□ or awareness of his body (and, by extension, awareness of his function as a figurative or representational allusion). The speaker's claims that □it doesn't much matter□ whether the work of art is connected to or recognized by its source and its own allusion raises the possibility that allusion/figuration is neither important nor necessary.

Bang proceeds to discuss questions about identity, suggesting that the figure facing up on the left side of Guston's painting is the □Jackself / we might have been,□ which (if this figure refers to an abstract expressionist) is a slight joke about Guston. The next lines, which probably refer to the scroll that reads □The Artists□ (□the one at the top□) and the listing of the various types of artists at the □tourist motel / at the bottom,□ suggest that there is a □degree of remove□ between the abstract idea of the artist and the material, functional reality of the artist at work. This comment, as well as the ironic and sarcastic line □some vigorous enactment□ and the speaker's comment on the fact that the artist's watch only estimates the time, suggest that both abstraction and figuration are somewhat distanced from the immediate reality.

Bang puts forward this idea even more clearly in the final stanzas of the poem, in which the artists are called □actors□ and are reduced to □standing / against a wall and watching / it all unfold.□ In fact, they are not simply distant from this reality; the artists comment detachedly about the minute, unimportant details connected to the □spine of the climax□ rather than the climax itself. Perhaps the key element to recognize about this climax of the poem's aesthetic commentary, however, is that it ceases to draw any distinction between abstraction and figuration. All artists and identities are grouped into the notion of □actors,□ and none of them seems able to deal with the open door to death and destruction.

It is clear, therefore, that Bang's poem takes Guston very seriously as a painter who is able to bring the viewer into close proximity with the themes of despair, death, destruction. It is also clear from her discussion of identity and artistic creation that Bang engages with the aesthetic debate of the painting. Bang's position on the debate between abstract and figurative art, however, takes a tone that can perhaps best be described as playfully mocking. She seems to be suggesting that, despite Guston's self-conscious exploration of the direction that art should take, artists are at a distance from reality regardless of whether they paint in abstract or in figurative terms. To Bang, the true □dilemma□ of Guston's painting, and the true dilemma of the arts, is that there is always a divide between the artist and reality, and abstraction and figuration (like composing, painting, sculpting, and poetry) are simply tools for attacking the same daunting problem.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on □Allegory,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she explores the relationship between mythology and reality in Mary Jo Bang's poem.

Throughout her poem □Allegory,□ Mary Jo Bang introduces the twin themes of mythology and reality. She sets them beside each other to demonstrate that mythology has no relevance to reality. The poem instead praises experience, preferably personal experience, as the real source of truth and knowledge. Her references to mythology are so readily recognized by the reader that Bang succeeds in making her point that mythology is, and always has been, an enduring element in thought, belief, and culture. By including these references in □Allegory,□ Bang seems to be challenging them head on and dismantling their past claims to truth.

The first stanza begins the process of defeating mythology by pointing to its meaninglessness in the real world. The speaker comments, □Of course, we're caught / in this sphere□ (lines 3 and 4). These lines remind the reader not only that all people have in common their current place in the sphere of this world but also that they are *caught* in it. There is no choice in the matter. It is merely the reality of being here, and it is a common experience shared by people everywhere. The speaker's personal point of view is reflected in her word choice □caught,□ which gives the reader an initial insight into the speaker's particular experience and personality. While this makes the speaker seem more realistic by giving her a persona, her word choice does not affect the truth of what she is saying.

Finishing the first stanza and moving into the next, the speaker adds, □where it doesn't much matter / whether our song reaches / the ear of Prometheus or not□ (lines 5-7). This is an important classical allusion. Prometheus was a character in Greek mythology who stole fire from Zeus to give to the mortals. Some accounts of the story of Prometheus tell us that he had already given the mortals other gifts, including brickwork, medicines, signs to be read in the sky, and art. After Prometheus had tricked Zeus and given mortals fire, however, Zeus punished Prometheus by having him chained to a mountain where an eagle came to gouge at his body and eat his liver. Every night, Prometheus would heal completely, and the eagle would return the next day. It was a horrifying punishment for a kindness done for mortals. In □Allegory,□ the speaker introduces the image of Prometheus suffering alone high on his mountain to show how useless music on earth is to him in his doomed state. Even if he were real, what good would a song do by reaching him? Bang makes the point that art created on earth is not for the benefit of mythical characters but for that of real people. The first two lines (□Let us console you. / Music's the answer□) make very clear that music and, by extension, art in general exist in the earthly world and have the ability to affect people. Music can provide true consolation to a person in emotional need. This is because people think, feel, and have experiences in the real world, not in the world of myths.

In the eighth stanza, the speaker comments directly on mythology, where she states, □Myth equals fate / plus embellishment□ (lines 39 and 40). Although fate may or may not be real, the truth is that there is nothing people can do to control or alter it. Because the speaker is developing a theme about truth, the notion of fate seems to be irrelevant. To put it into an equation with embellishment, which is divergence *from* the truth, makes fate even more meaningless. Together, the speaker essentially sums up myth as embellished fate. She understands myth as the creation of people bent on fashioning stories, interest, history, and purpose in their reality. To cast this light on the story of Prometheus, the speaker would likely say that the story was made up as a way for the ancient Greeks to value their ancestors because, after all, something as basic as fire was a divine gift to them, for which someone paid a very high price. This understanding is more exciting than just believing that early people got fire from a lightning storm. To return to the speaker's equation, the myth of Prometheus is simply an embellishment of the fact that early people would inevitably have fire. The myth has no meaning or relevance to reality or truth.

The speaker rejects mythology as a source of truth or wisdom, but she does not leave the reader wondering where truth can be found. She believes that reality provides truth and meaning and that wisdom is gleaned from experience. In the third stanza, the speaker introduces a medical term, □Somatognosis□ (line 12). This word refers to a person's sense of his or her body's existence and functioning. Like the story of Prometheus, this word has Greek origins: *somato* means □body,□ and *gnosis* means □knowledge.□ This refers to a very concrete form of knowledge; it is knowledge of□and through□a person's bodily existence. Somatognosis is illustrated in the tenth stanza, where the speaker remarks, □The kinesthetic lift of a foot / from the floor / forces itself to be felt□ (lines 47-49). This refers to a person's first lifting up on a Ferris wheel and feeling his or her foot leave the ground. It is a very tangible illustration that the reader can easily understand. Because the image is so tangible, the reader almost experiences the lift of the foot as he or she reads the poem. It immediately connects the reader to the truth of that image through physical experience.

At the end of the third stanza, the speaker asks, □What does it feel like / to inch one's way forward?□ (lines 14 and 15), which brings the reader to the idea of experiencing progress. This type of progress is very different from the progress stolen from Mount Olympus by Prometheus; this is progress made and felt through a human body. Also, notice how the speaker says □inch one's way forward,□ which is progress made on earth, as opposed to □inch one's way upward,□ which would be progress toward the mountaintop realm of Prometheus. Bang is drawing very sharp lines between the real world and the world of fantasy and mythology. Similarly, the speaker introduces a startling image of a new beginning: □Dawn on its knees / crawls toward knowledge□ (lines 17 and 18). Here again, Bang expresses that knowledge is gained by slow and steady movement forward in the real world. Knowledge of the truth is acquired only through experience over time. It requires patience and also willingness to make the slow movements in the right direction.

In developing her theme of myth and reality, Bang utilizes symbolism to give the reader a visual cue. In □Allegory,□ mountains symbolize the realm of myths, and the bottom of

the mountains symbolizes the real world. These mountains give a strong sense of □here□ in the real world and □there□ in the mythical and unknown realm. In the figure of Prometheus, Bang introduces two mountains that are specific to myths. The mountain to which Prometheus is chained is one, and Mount Olympus is the other. Mount Olympus was the source of the fire Prometheus stole to give to mortals at the bottom of the mountain. Both mountains are fictitious, and both are important to the myth of Prometheus's giving fire to the mortals. This illustration also calls attention to the land at the bottom of the mountain, where the mortals who received fire lived. In the context of this poem, that land represents the realm of truth. The mortals, after all, were no different from real people today. From a historical perspective, those mortals were the ones who created the myths that are rejected in the poem, but the people were as real as the gods they created were not.

Another image of a mountain occurs in the seventh stanza. The speaker asks, □What's the degree of remove / between the one at the top / of Pie Mountain / and the tourist motel / at the bottom with its pool / of aqua attitude and blue inflatables?□ The speaker makes a clear delineation between someone at the top of a mountain and ordinary tourists at the bottom of the mountain. She even asks to what extent they are separated, indicating that they are indeed in different realms. Because she gives no specifics about the person at the top of the mountain, or if she is even referring to a person (she uses an indeterminate □one□), the reader immediately relates to the tourists playing in the motel pool. Further, because the tourists are depicted engaged in such a common activity, the reader is able to recall his or her own experiences on similar vacations. This is another way she sets the reader's feet solidly on the ground of truth and experience.

Although Bang makes distinctions between mythology and the real world in □Allegory,□ she also acknowledges that people have a tendency to create their own personal mythologies, even if they reject classical myths. In the fifth and sixth stanzas, she describes the act of embracing □Who- / do-you-wish-to-be?□ She concludes the fifth stanza with the statement, □Tonight we'll be content / with whomever we think we are.□ In the next stanza, the speaker describes setting off in a car with the person she might have been: □The door of the car will click-close / and off we'll go. / In the back is the Jackself / we might have been.□ To allow the reader to hear the door closing, Bang very effectively uses alliteration (□car will click-close□), or the repetition of consonants, and onomatopoeia (□click-close□), or the use of words whose sounds suggest their meaning. This makes the reader feel that he or she is also in the car with the speaker and her other self. It brings the poem alive to the reader's senses, so that being in the car seems like something the reader is actually experiencing. According to the way Bang has built the theme of truth in this poem, experience is the litmus test of truth and the path to knowledge. So her decision to make the reader feel that he or she is sitting there in the car is a major cue that something important is about to be revealed in the comfort and privacy of the car.

The speaker returns to the image of the car in the ninth stanza, where the reader finds that their destination was a carnival. What is important to the themes of myth and truth, however, is that Bang ties the two together without contradicting anything else she has

claimed about how unrelated the two are. The difference is that with the image of driving her □might have been□ self to the carnival, she introduces the notion of a personal mythology. This is why she remarks that people are content with whoever they think they are. That, like the kinesthetic experience of a foot lifting from the ground or playing in a motel swimming pool, is a truthful experience almost any reader has had. A personal mythology may not be any more true than the myth of Prometheus, but the experience of having one rings very true with the reader.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on □Allegory,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Research the life and artwork of Philip Guston. How would you describe his artistic style? What were his key influences? Why did he shift to practice abstract expressionism, and why did he shift back to figurative painting? What are the differences between abstract expressionist and figurative art, and how are these differences apparent in Guston's work?

Bang makes reference to the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus in □Allegory.□ Who was Prometheus, and why was he important? Why do you think the mythology about him has been influential over Western literature? Why do you think Bang refers to him in her poem, and how do you think this reference affects the poem?

Think of a lesson you would like to teach and then create an allegory for it. Brainstorm until you find the right story and situation to bring across your message. Then tell your allegory to a group of friends or classmates and ask them to describe its message. How did their response compare with your original idea?

The convention of ekphrasis stretches all of the way back to ancient Greece and Rome, and it was particularly popular in the romantic period. Discuss the relationship between words and images today. When and why does literature become highly visual? What does this say about the work of literature? What are some of the ways a contemporary writer would go about describing artwork, and why would he or she choose to do so?

What Do I Read Next?

Bang's first collection, *Apology for Want* (1997), established her as a prominent and sophisticated poet able to address intellectual themes while retaining an engaging and playful style.

Philip Guston's *Late Work* (1998) is an intimate portrait of the artist that focuses on his shift back to figurative painting, written by the renowned poet, and friend of Guston, William Corbett.

Jill Bialosky's *Subterranean* (2001) is a collection of vivid poetry about grief, motherhood, and desire.

The Whitsun Weddings (1964), by the English poet Philip Larkin, is a collection of masterly verse that ranges in tone from playful to biting and bleak.

Jonathan Strong's *Secret Words* (1992) is a charming and touching novel about a late bloomer who moves out of her parents' house at age twenty-nine and begins to find her way in the world.

Further Study

Auping, Michael, ed., *Philip Guston: Retrospective*, Thames & Hudson, 2003.

Providing images and analyses of Guston's work throughout his long career, including high-quality reproductions of his paintings, this comprehensive volume will help the reader place Guston's *Allegory* in its artistic context.

Bang, Mary Jo, ed., *Whatever You Desire: A Book of Lesbian Poetry*, Oscars Press, 1990.

The collection of poetry about lesbian themes that Bang edited in 1990 provides a useful background to some of the twentieth-century women authors by whom Bang is influenced.

Heffernan, James A. W., *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, University of Chicago Press, 2004.

In this study of the convention of ekphrasis throughout the history of Western literature, Heffernan pays particular attention to how and why poetic methods of capturing the visual have developed and changed.

Kirby, David, □Give Me Rapture and Bliss,□ in *New York Times Book Review*, March 4, 2001, p. 23.

Kirby's favorable review of Bang's verse novel *Louise in Love* provides an important example of the critical community's positive reaction to the poet.

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Bang, Mary Jo, □Allegory,□ in *The Eye like a Strange Balloon: Poems*, Grove Press, 2004, pp. 55-57; originally published in *Paris Review*, No. 171, Fall 2004, pp. 36-38.

Scharf, Michael, Review of *The Eye like a Strange Balloon*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 251, No. 42, October 18, 2004, p. 61.

Seaman, Donna, Review of *The Eye like a Strange Balloon*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 101, No. 6, November 15, 2004, p. 547.

BOOKRAGS

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Project Editor
David Galens

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

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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