Apple sauce for Eve Study Guide

Apple sauce for Eve by Marge Piercy

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Introduction

"Apple sauce for Eve" appears in Marge Piercy's *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish Theme*, published in 1998. As the title of the collection suggests, one source of inspiration for this work was the poet's connection to Judaism, but it is hardly a typical religious poem. Perhaps an even greater motivating factor was her unwavering belief in feminist causes and a determination to reevaluate the traditional concepts found in biblical stories.

Piercy applauds Eve, the biblical first woman, for her quest for knowledge and her disregard of any divine retribution for eating the infamous apple. To enhance the effort to promote logic, rationale, and intellectual pursuit over superstition and fear, Piercy uses scientific metaphors to describe Eve's desire and her decision to commit the "original sin." Eve and Satan are likened to "lab partners," and Eve is deemed "the first scientist."

In spite of any apparent sacrilege a synopsis of this poem implies, readers should not condemn and cast it off as such. In fact, its inclusion in a book dedicated to exploring Jewish belief, doctrine, and history points to just the opposite. *The Art of Blessing the Day* celebrates the poet's Jewish heritage□sometimes with pious reflection, sometimes with humor, and sometimes with candid attacks on established and questionable protocol.

Author Biography

Marge Piercy was born on March 31, 1936, in Detroit, Michigan. She grew up in a racially diverse working-class neighborhood. Her father was in and out of work for several years, and the two never developed a strong father-daughter bond. Her mother was a high-strung but imaginative woman who Piercy credits with inspiring her to be a writer. Piercy's mother told her daughter odd tales and folklore and encouraged her to read voraciously. Although their relationship became strained as Piercy grew into young adulthood, she and her mother reunited later in life and were close until the older woman's death in 1985.

One of the most influential people in Piercy's life was her maternal grandmother, who was born in Lithuania, the daughter of a rabbi. Grandmother Hannah preserved a strict Jewish heritage regardless of some of her descendents' marriages to Christians. Piercy was raised Jewish by her mother and grandmother, even though her father was from a Presbyterian family. The combination of strong women in her life, working-class values, and a rich Jewish tradition served to influence not only the person Piercy would become but also the writer she would develop into.

Piercy was the first person in her family to go to college. In 1957, she earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan; in 1958, she received a master's degree from Northwestern University. In school, she was a bit of an aberration with her unconventional attitude about gender roles and her radical views toward authority and government policies. As a result, she had trouble publishing her work□mostly fiction□throughout the 1950s.

In 1958, Piercy married her first husband, a Jewish French scientist, but she divorced him a year later because he did not accept her feminism nor take her writing seriously. In 1962, she married a computer scientist, and this marriage lasted fourteen years, ending in divorce in 1980. In 1982, she married for the third time, to Ira Wood, a writer and publisher.

During the 1960s, Piercy became active in the antiwar movement, the Civil Rights movement, and the women's movement. Her fiction and poetry began to receive recognition. Piercy has published prolifically, beginning with her first collection of poetry, *Breaking Camp* (1968) and her first novel, *Going Down Fast* (1969). Piercy's publications include over a dozen novels and fifteen volumes of poetry.

Piercy is considered one of the strongest, most profound voices for feminist causes. While her work has been labeled controversial, radical, and opinionated, it is also considered vital and honest. In 2000, she was awarded the Paterson Poetry Prize for *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish Theme* (1999), the collection in which "Apple sauce for Eve" appears.

Plot Summary

Lines 1—3

An analysis of "Apple sauce for Eve" should actually begin with the title. The accepted spelling of "applesauce" is as one word, so there must be a reason that Piercy chose to separate it into two. The subject and themes of the poem suggest that the word "apple" needs to stand alone for its significant allusion to the biblical story of Adam and Eve. The word "sauce" becomes significant for its indication that the Eve in this poem is doing something more with a piece of fruit than the Eve of religious lore was given credit for.

In the first line, "Those old daddies" refers to the writers of the first books of the Old Testament and of other religious doctrine that relates the story of humankind's original sin, perpetrated by a woman. Note that the word "daddies" is chosen instead of "fathers," perhaps because it connotes a slightly wry, less respectful attitude on the part of the speaker, an attitude she maintains throughout the poem. The daddies cursed not only Eve but "us in you," meaning all women in general. In lines 2 and 3, the reason for Eve's damnation is revealed: "curiosity," or the "sin" of "wanting knowledge."

Lines 4—5

These lines describe some of the ways in which Eve approaches her quest to learn, beginning with the last few words in line 3: "To try, to taste, / to take into the body, into the brain." There is a correlation between the body and the mind, because both are necessary for examining new knowledge and not just in passive ways. Instead, Eve will "turn each thing, each sign, each factoid" in various directions to see how it changes. In other words, Eve's approach is scientific; she gains her knowledge through objective experimentation.

Lines 6—9

The final lines of the first stanza use scientific imagery to show the seriousness and insatiable quality of Eve's longing for knowledge. The notion that "white / fractures into colors" refers to the fact that white reflects nearly all the rays of sunlight and is actually made up of all the colors of the rainbow. As a result, the "image breaks / into crystal fragments that pierce the nerves / while the brain casts the chips into patterns." These last two descriptions suggest that science may have a stinging, yet stimulating, effect on the physical being, but the informed mind can take the fragments and chips and crystals and shape them into definable patterns. This statement is a clear assertion of the human□and particularly the woman's□will to use intellect over physicality to discover new truths.

Lines 10—14

These lines allude to the nursery rhymes "Little Jack Horner" and "Little Boy Blue." Little Boy Blue is summoned to "come blow your horn" in order to herd his farm animals, but he neglects his duties for a nap under a haystack. In Piercy's poem, it is "Each experiment" that "sticks a finger deep in the pie" and that "blows a horn in the ear / of belief." It is science that "lets the nasty and difficult brats"□referring to the naughty boys in the nursery rhymes□loose on a complacent and motionless world. Here, though, the "brats" are "real questions," and the world is likened to a "desiccated parlor of stasis."

These lines are arguably some of the most poignant in the poem, and it is important to understand what they are saying. Eve's decision to gain knowledge by experimenting on her own, as opposed to just absorbing what she has been told and accepting her role as a docile, submissive female, shakes up the male-dominated status quo. She knows that having the guts to speak up and ask "real questions" is shocking to those who adhere to tradition and established customs of behavior along gender lines. But, she does not care. The "desiccated" (dried out, lifeless) world, she decides, needs a swift kick.

Lines 15—16

Here, the speaker continues defending the need for testing, trying, and experimenting with current knowledge because the things "we all know to be true, constant" right now may be incomplete, if not altogether false. She uses an effective metaphor to make the point, as one can easily picture how quickly frost on a window melts when a jet of warm steam hits it. Current beliefs will also melt away when science provides new knowledge.

Lines 17—19

The final lines of the second stanza pose a rhetorical question regarding what may have happened if the quest for knowledge had been encouraged and celebrated in ancient times instead of being squelched, at least in the case of curious women. The reference to "dead languages" means those languages no longer in popular use, such as ancient Egyptian, Latin, or biblical Hebrew. The phrase "But what happens if I" suggests an attempt to try something different or to experiment with something to see what results. Following this phrase with "Whoops!" is whimsical, but it also implies a mishap or a less than desirable result. The suggestion that these words are translations of the "last words" of dead languages insinuates "too little, too late" on the part of old customs making way for new possibilities.

Lines 20—21

In line 20, the biblical first man is diminished to the status of a simple-minded, happy puppy. While Eve and Satan "shimmy up the tree" of knowledge to tempt fate and learn something, Adam stays on the ground, "wagging his tail" like a "good dog."

Lines 22—23

These lines describe Eve and Satan as "lab partners" whose pursuit of the tree's forbidden apple appears as a "dance of will and hunger." The speaker points out that their desire is not sexual but a yearning that is "of the brain." The contrast between Adam and Eve is obviously exaggerated in the first lines of the third stanza□he the doltish, acquiescent pet, and she the daring, unstoppable champion of learning. The speaker makes no apology for such labeling, perhaps because she feels the tables have been too long turned in the other direction.

Lines 24—25

The speaker continues her assault of men, accusing men of "always think[ing] women are wanting sex." She abruptly throws in allusions to male genitals, "cock, snake," to show her disgust with such shallow thinking and possibly to tout her readiness to use words long considered impolite and inappropriate for females. She chastises men for believing a woman can be satisfied with romance and passion "when it is the world she's after." Eve cannot accept that the tree of knowledge is off limits, so she willingly goes after that knowledge.

Lines 26—29

In these four lines, Piercy turns the poem toward a secular, or worldly, philosophical viewpoint. In his classic *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1637), mathematician and philosopher René Descartes states, "I think; therefore, I am." This famous line summed up his belief that he had proven his own existence through mathematical and scientific reasoning as opposed to through theological or traditional philosophical thought. The speaker in "Apple sauce for Eve" refers either to Descartes or to Eve herself as the "first conceived kid / of the ego," which may seem derogatory but which reflects her concept of defining the self by use of the *mind* more than the heart or soul. Taking Descartes's theory a few steps further, the speaker says, "I / kick the tree" (meaning the tree of knowledge). The speaker then asks the age-old philosophical question, "who am I," followed by "why am I." Note that the latter three words play a dual role. The question "Why am I?" can stand on its own to suggest an individual pondering the reason for his or her existence, but the question actually continues into line 29: "why am I, / going, going to die, die, die." In essence, Eve wants to know the answer to the larger question, not of why she exists but of why she is going to be condemned for wanting knowledge.

Lines 30—31

The final stanza of this poem is more upbeat, hopeful, and celebratory than the previous three stanzas. The familiar phrase "necessity is the mother of invention" (meaning when a human need arises for something, somebody will create a solution for it) takes on new

power when it is Eve who is "indeed the mother of invention." She is also credited as "the first scientist," a bestowal that supersedes even being the first woman. These descriptions herald Eve not for her meek obedience to a master or acceptance of her position in the Garden of Eden but for her higher, more logical aspirations.

Lines 32—34

The name "Eve" is said to be derivative of the Hebrew *chavah*, to breathe, or *chayah*, to live. The speaker states bluntly, "Your name means / life." She then refers back to images from the first stanza in describing Eve's determination to learn and to see the world from an intellectual, logical viewpoint. Experimentation requires "tasting" and "testing" and often "swimming against / the current" instead of going along with the flow of one's own time and place. Knowledge, for Eve, is as necessary and nutritious as food and water□all the things one needs to stay alive.

Lines 35—36

The "We" in these lines could refer to all of humankind, male and female, but more likely it specifies women. Eve's "bright hunger" and her "first experiment" gave birth to succeeding generations of women who followed in her path of defiance, determination, and unyielding quest for knowledge.

Lines 37—38

The metaphor that ends this poem is perhaps the most jubilant image in the entire poem. The speaker concedes that the forbidden apple may have contained the "worm" of "death," a worm that Eve set loose on humankind, but the apple also contained seeds. Seeds connote new beginnings, new life, and growth. They are the beginnings of "freedom" for women and the eventual "flowering of choice," a chance for women to make their own decisions and pursue whatever goals they desire. These lines ultimately champion the feminist voice, and they credit Eve with having paved the way for all her descendants.

Themes

Midrash

In Hebrew, the word *darash* means to seek out or to look further, and it provides the root for the word *midrash*, which is the premise for Piercy's writing "Apple sauce for Eve." Midrash is commonly a creative attempt to answer questions or fill in the blanks left vacant by traditional, stark biblical text that goes only so far in explaining a historical event. Originally, midrash referred to a specific body of work written before and during the Middle Ages by rabbis who made commentaries on the five books of the Torah. Today, midrash means any imaginative work□such as stories, poems, artwork, or even dance□that tries to round out or give substance to vague or missing explanations in biblical text.

Examples of historical accounts that may elicit midrash are Abraham's journey with his son Isaac up Mount Moriah to where the boy is to be sacrificed, and the story of Lot who offers his daughters as appeasement to an angry group of men surrounding their home. Someone interested in these events for the sake of midrash may create a work that attempts to address critical issues that are not explored within the histories: Where was Isaac's mother when his father took Isaac to be killed? How may she have felt about this act? What did Lot's daughters really think about their father's offering them up to a mob? Midrash is often subversive, daring to question the highest authority and to suggest controversial answers, as Piercy's poem demonstrates.

In this work, the question is perhaps more rhetorical than precise: What if Eve's surrender to temptation was viewed positively instead of negatively? In the first two lines, the speaker acknowledges the commonly held belief about the Bible's first woman, that she was a sinner who deserved to be "cursed" for centuries to come by the "old daddies." The remainder of the poem examines Eve's defiant act in a different light: she is praised for her "curiosity" and cheered for "wanting knowledge." She rises above the presumed desire for physical pleasure to show that "it is the world she's after," not sex with a man. The speaker calls attention to Eve's name itself; her name "means / life." The irony is that the original writers of Eve's story concluded that she introduced death and condemnation to humanity.

The point of Piercy's midrash on the story of Adam and Eve is not to simply ruffle feathers among the Jewish status quo but to stimulate discussion on established doctrine and to encourage a rethinking of the story's message. Why condemn Eve to an eternity of blame and disgrace when all she wanted was to be smart? How would the history of women's roles in the world be different if Eve had been called a heroine instead of a heretic? Questions such as these are at the heart of contemporary midrash, particularly *feminist* midrash, and feminism is clearly another important theme in this poem.

Celebrating Feminism "Scientifically"

Readers need not be familiar with Piercy's devotion to feminist causes to recognize "Apple sauce for Eve" as a feminist poem. From the mocking opening lines to the jubilant finish, this work speaks to the strength, willingness, intelligence, and ultimate victory of women in a world hostile to their goals. As such, it is not particularly rare or shocking, since the women's movement established itself as a vibrant social and political force more than three decades ago and has produced countless feminist writers since. What makes this poem memorable is the methodical and consistent use of science metaphors (metaphors are figures of speech that express ideas through comparison to other things, implying a likeness between them) to relay the theme. In this case, Eve's daring to eat the apple from the tree of knowledge is compared to a scientist's quest for exploration and discovery.

The metaphor is introduced subtly in the first stanza, where Eve is described as a woman who wants "To try, to taste, / to take into the body, into the brain," implying her desire for something different, something new. The science imagery strengthens in the following lines; Eve does not simply want to be a passive recipient of whatever her body and brain take in, but to "turn each thing . . . round and round" and to observe "white / fractur[ing] into colors" while her "brain casts the chips into patterns." In essence, she prefers a scientific approach.

The metaphor defines Eve's desire for logical, rational thinking. Readers need only note the language to see it in action: "Each experiment," "real questions," "lab partners," "mother of invention," "first scientist," "finite, dynamic," "testing," "products of that first experiment." These descriptors characterize Eve's quest to gain knowledge by relying on intellect instead of emotion. But why is this metaphor significant to a feminist cause? Because women were not traditionally viewed as being scientific. Piercy's use of science metaphors flies in the face of what centuries of strict gender roles have taught. Science is bold and dares to question established thought. Science is frequently at odds with religion. Science is likely the last thing that the biblical Eve would have had in mind when she took her first bite of the apple. For all these reasons, science is an appropriate metaphor with which to celebrate feminism. Comparing Eve to a scientist affords her a place in the world of inquiry, innovation, and discovery, a place where only men traditionally have been allowed.

Style

First established by noted French poets during the late nineteenth century, free verse has been a popular form of poetry for over a hundred years. Rimbaud, Laforgue, Viele-Griffin, and other French poets began a literary revolt against the strict rules of their culture's verse, which dictated specific patterns of rhyme and meter. Free verse has no "rules" per se, although many poets who use it may create their own patterns within poems, usually in regard to controlled rhythm as opposed to rhyme or meter.

Contemporary free verse is a label that addresses content more than style. By the mid-twentieth century, poets, fiction writers, and other artists started expressing themselves through language and subject matter previously considered taboo□most notably, references to sexual activity, violence, and personal emotions, as well as the use of slang words to describe them. In sum, free verse is more liberal than traditional verse forms, and contemporary free verse is yet more liberal than the free verse of old.

In "Apple sauce for Eve," Piercy does not restrict her lines with any guided rhythm. Instead, she lets the text flow as continuous units of thought, just as sentences in a prose piece do. Like most free verse poems, this one could be put into paragraph form and read just as well.

Like many contemporary writers, Piercy is free with her use of graphic language, undisguised subject matter, and vivid metaphors□or, figures of speech that express ideas by comparing an object or image to a different object or image. For example, she calls Eve and the snake "lab partners" to suggest their shared goals, as well as to reinforce the science imagery in the poem. Piercy also uses the word "snake" as a reference to male genitalia, a metaphor demonstrating that she does not shy away from controversial statements nor candid descriptions, and, most likely, feels that the poem is all the more effective for it.

Historical Context

During the latter part of the twentieth century, Jewish women in America confronted the same challenges that many women, regardless of religion, confronted: how to find harmony between the desire for personal growth, freedom, and, for many, a career and the more "traditional" expectations of being a wife, mother, and homemaker. This issue has presented a conundrum for women in great numbers at least since the beginnings of the women's movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But, it has been especially problematic for those whose religions and cultural histories dictate traditional gender roles. While some age-old restrictions began to ease for Jewish women during this time□such as having greater opportunities to work outside the home and having a stronger voice in religious services□many were still expected to put family duties ahead of any personal aspirations and to accept the fundamental patriarchal nature of Judaism.

The main rift over the issue of gender roles in Judaism is between the Orthodox and Reform factions of the faith. According to Jewish orthodoxy, the original Holy Scriptures prescribed the roles of men and women, and, therefore, to stray from their instructions would be the same as rejecting them. Orthodox Jews do not feel that their beliefs are based on a desire to oppress the female gender but simply to carry out the word of God. Followers of this most conservative sect of Judaism have endured the greatest struggle between Old World tradition and New World culture, and one of the most controversial issues they have encountered is the possible ordination of women as rabbis. For many, the question is not considered even debatable by humans because it is the law of a higher authority that forbids women to be rabbis.

Members of the Reform faction, however, have seen the greatest increase in women's rights and privileges within the Jewish faith. In this more liberal denomination, women have been earning the title of rabbi for more than three decades□the first, Sally Priesand, was ordained in 1972. Aside from gaining acceptance in positions of religious authority, women in Reform Judaism have also enjoyed a greater sense of personal freedom and independence, much the same as their non-Jewish counterparts. In essence, they have found a way to blend their respect for conservative Jewish cultural values□such as family, children, and religious ritual□into a liberal, contemporary environment without compromising either.

It is likely the stricter Orthodox denomination of her faith that provided the impetus behind Piercy's writing "Apple sauce for Eve." The arguments regarding feminism for this most conservative sect of Judaism are obviously more theological than philosophical, and, therefore, more difficult to reinterpret or reform. In 1998, however, some Orthodox Jewish congregations began to employ female "congregational interns" who are permitted to perform some tasks usually reserved for rabbis, such as preaching, teaching, and consulting on Jewish legal matters. Still, the interns are not allowed to lead worship services, so the feminist idea of "equality" is left unsatisfied. Some, though, would argue that the gap between conservative historical practice and contemporary cultural change has been narrowed, at least a bit.

Critical Overview

For decades, Piercy's work has fascinated, flabbergasted, intrigued, angered, and shocked readers, but it is rarely overlooked. As a young writer, Piercy had trouble publishing her fiction and poetry because of its controversial nature□1950s America was not ready for it. However, the 1960s ushered in a new American era. Suddenly, Piercy's views on feminism, racism, and politics were shared by a great number of people. Critics began taking her work seriously and, for over thirty years since, have lauded her work for its powerful voice, striking metaphors, and direct address of contentious subjects that some writers avoid.

In *Judaism*, critic Steven P. Schneider writes:

Piercy displays the full range of her voice and poetic imagination in *The Art of Blessing the Day*. Although she claims that being a woman and a Jew is "sometimes more / of a contradiction than I can sweat out," she shows in this volume that she is adroit enough to walk the tightrope between those identities that intersect in surprising and unusual ways in these poems.

In a review in *Poetry* of Piercy's *What Are Big Girls Made Of*, which was published two years before *The Art of Blessing the Day*, critic John Taylor asserts, "These feminist poems may stir listeners who hear them read aloud . . . yet their language resembles that of rallying cries. It is a language confident in its power to designate and deplore." If any one word may be used to sum up the general character of Piercy's poetry, it is "confident." Despite her dubious beginnings in the publishing world, she is today a strong voice in contemporary American poetry.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill examines the various comparisons of women to children in Piercy's poem and contends that these associations make up the core of the poem's celebratory spirit.

Claiming a link between women and children is as old as motherhood itself and usually entails the natural physical bond between mother and child, as well as centuries of social mores that have assigned child care to the female gender. Poems addressing the ties between women and children are also commonplace and often sentimental and tender, not contentious and controversial. Piercy's "Apple sauce for Eve" is not a typical mother-and-child poem; there is not even a typical "mother" or typical "child" in it. Instead, the link here lies in the childlike innocence, curiosity, and determination that Piercy applies to Eve's quest for knowledge. Eve is not only *all* women, but the *mother* of all women; ironically, her exuberance and resolve are that of a "difficult brat," "kid / of the ego," and bouncing baby all wrapped up into one.

The first line of the poem establishes the flippant attitude of the narrator with her reference to the biblical Jewish forefathers as "old daddies." But "daddy" is also an endearing term, especially when used by a child to call her father. While the most likely intent of the word here is to mock the writers of the Old Testament who condemned Eve in the Garden of Eden tale, it also sets the tone for succeeding metaphors in the poem that use child imagery to *praise* Eve.

The allusion to nursery rhyme characters in the second stanza enhances the association between childlike enthusiasm and Eve's excitement over learning new things. She is as persistent and naughty in her pursuit as mischievous little boys who shirk their duties in order to do whatever they *want* to do. Here, Eve wants to eat the apple. She wants to see what comes of it, what knowledge she will gain, what new truths will be revealed to her. In essence, she is one of the "difficult brats" who dares to buck the system. She is as defiant and determined as a child who screams to get her way until she gets it.

Eve's attributes thus far may not seem like something to be proud of, much less praiseworthy, yet there is an air of jubilant vigor in her resolve to experiment, to "turn each thing . . . / round and round" until "white / fractures into colors," until "the image breaks" and the "chips" fall where they may "into patterns." She does not claim to know any answers, only that the ones she has been handed so far by Adam and by a God considered male in the annals of Jewish doctrine fall far short of what she believes may be out there. Like a rebellious kid who will not take "because I said so" for an answer or like an inquisitive scientist who is not satisfied with only one result, Eve forges ahead with her decision to try something new. If she ends up saying, "Whoops!" in the end, so be it.

Even the famed thinker René Descartes has nothing on Eve in her pursuit of knowledge. After all, the world's first woman is not content to sit around and *think* about her existence; she needs to get up and "kick the tree" to see what falls from it. She does not stop at discovering why she lives; she wants to know why she is "going, going to die, die, die." In the hard-hitting third stanza, in which the speaker levels blatant accusations against men and calls her God-given mate a "good dog," the child imagery is still present. Whether it is Eve or Descartes who is the "first conceived kid / of the ego," the allusion supports the notion that youth and innocence lay the groundwork for many relentless endeavors.

The reality of the question *Why am I going to die because of my desire to become knowledgeable?* is ominous at best. The fact that the question must be asked by Eve, or by the speaker in the poem, drives home her frustration in having simple human curiosity in a world that dictates curiosity is for men only. She possesses the same intellect, skills, inquisitiveness, and determination as any male counterpart and yet her gender requires a separate path. Eve may be "the first conceived kid" to recognize a desire for something more than life has allotted her, but she also is well aware that acting upon that desire may mean doom. But like a little girl who knows her daddy will punish her for eating the extra cookie, Eve takes a bite of the forbidden treat anyway, relishes its taste, and waits for the penalty to come.

The final stanza of "Apple sauce for Eve" is the most celebratory of the poem and the one in which the speaker plainly states, "We are all the children of your bright hunger." Metaphorically, women are the "products of that first experiment," and the retribution Eve suffers for her daring is worth it because it brings "freedom and the flowering of choice" to succeeding generations of females. In spite of the obvious odds against Eve's success (odds meted out by the status quo) the initial and final tone of the poem is one of ovation and victory. The speaker is energetic and passionate in affirming Eve's achievement: "You are indeed the mother of invention," "Your name means / life," "We are all the children," "We are all products," "the seeds were freedom." It appears that the bitterness and sarcasm of the speaker's earlier details are diminished in the sheer joy of celebration.

Not surprisingly, some readers of Piercy's work are uncomfortable with both the subject matter and the poet's seemingly irreverent handling of it. Is this not blasphemy? Can a Jewish poet ridicule Jewish teachings and still be a devout Jew? The opinion here is *yes*. The practice, or art, of midrash has been around for centuries. Its intent has always been to enhance standard, traditional writings, to fill in the blanks left open by official doctrine, and that is Piercy's intent as well with "Apple sauce for Eve." (The section of *The Art of Blessing the Day* that includes this poem is called "Toldot, Midrashism [Of History and Interpretation].") If the poem seems crude and ribald, or just humorous, its tone is simply a reflection of the period in which it was written. Contemporary midrash takes on contemporary issues in a contemporary manner. In praising Eve and in allotting her a playful innocence and childlike determination to show her resolve, the speaker is not mean-spirited or hateful. She pokes fun at some of the fundamentals of religious teachings but she never steps over the line. In essence, Piercy does not defy God in this poem, only the men who interpret God's word.

Perhaps the use of child imagery to portray both the naughty and the innocent nature of Eve serves to soften the blunt language that some readers find distasteful. Though she is described as a "lab partner" of Satan's, she is also a curious kid filled with awe and excitement at all the possibilities the world holds. Though she takes a shot at the "old daddies" who condemned her, she also paves the way for centuries of women *and men* to come who, like her, would dare to question and experiment and discover rather than remain static and void of imagination. If Eve is not wholly innocent here, she is allowed just enough "sin" to prove her devotion to a cause she believes is just. She is strong-willed and steadfast but not blasphemous or profane.

Any reader still uncomfortable with Piercy's poetic midrash on the story of Adam and Eve may want to read the entire collection in which this work appears before passing final judgment on it. There, one will find serious, somber poems on faith and Judaism; tender yet candid accounts of family and love and passion; and, wry, no-holds-barred examinations of Jewish tradition set against contemporary culture with a bit of humor thrown in to lighten the load. Perhaps after placing "Apple sauce for Eve" within the context of the complete volume, one may understand why Piercy's biblical first woman could never be content with a simple, ordinary apple. She is bound to make sauce of it.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Apple sauce for Eve," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Perkins is a professor of American literature and film. In this essay, Perkins explores the poem's focus on the hunger for knowledge.

In her review of *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish Theme*, Judy Clarence writes that in this collection, "in many ways [her] best yet," Marge Piercy "brings together poems written to celebrate [her] Jewishness, reflecting and expressing the joy, pain, passion, and elegance of this rich culture." Donna Seaman and Jack Helbig, in their review of the collection for *Booklist*, note that Piercy dedicated these works to the Grrrl movement, "a feisty form of feminist expression found in zines and music and on the Web□because Piercy had been Grrrl long before Grrrl got its name."

One of the finest poems in this collection, "Apple sauce for Eve" reflects Piercy's Jewish heritage as well as her dedication to feminist expression. The poem centers on the story of Eve eating the apple from the tree of knowledge and the consequences this action had on Jewish women. Yet, the statements the poem makes about oppression of women and the desire for freedom are universal. Felicia Mitchell, in her article on Piercy for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, insists that "Piercy's liturgical poems follow the Jewish mystical tradition for some readers and appeal to others on a different level, [which] affirms her appeal to an audience as diverse as her poems." "Apple sauce for Eve" becomes a call to all women to break the bonds of tradition and satisfy their hunger for knowledge.

Piercy's voice becomes personal and universal in "Apple sauce for Eve" as she encourages women to recognize their ancestral link to Eve. She addresses, much like Langston Hughes does in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," an entire community, tracing its continuity over the centuries. While Hughes speaks of the black race's strength and endurance, reaching back to the beginning of time, Piercy maps out Jewish women's desire for knowledge, a need first expressed by Eve as she eats the forbidden apple. The struggle against the restraints of Jewish orthodoxy becomes a universal one for all women living under patriarchal systems who share the dream of self actualization and freedom. "Apple sauce for Eve" presents alternatives to oppressive traditions and celebrates communal solidarity and significant change.

Piercy announces this theme in the poem's title, which, along with the title of the collection, becomes an ironic statement of Eve's independence. Applesauce, made with honey and apples, is served on Jewish holy days to sweeten the year. The apple, however, was forbidden to Eve. God denied her knowledge much like Judaism denies women the highly esteemed position of scholar in its community. Jewish orthodoxy promotes scholarship as one of the highest callings, but this role is reserved for men, not women. Piercy celebrates Eve's challenge of this doctrine by rewarding her with the celebratory applesauce. The collection's title, *The Art of Blessing the Day*, which derives from the Jewish custom of reciting daily blessings, reinforces the praise for Eve's courageous actions.

The poem chronicles and honors Eve's challenge throughout its free-verse stanzas, an appropriate form for a poem that centers on individual and collective freedom. In the first, the speaker addresses the curse suffered by Eve and her descendents after she disobeyed God's law by eating the apple, which granted her knowledge. Piercy insists that Eve was "damned for [her] curiosity." She was punished not only for her disobedience but also for "wanting knowledge," which the "old daddies," God and the male rulers of the entrenched patriarchies that have ruled women for centuries, forbid her and all women□"the us" in Eve. This is the paradise that she and her descendents have been denied.

This stanza also begins to outline the innate desire for knowledge, which Piercy likens here to a crystal of many facets that fracture into fragments as each "factoid" is taken into the brain. The speaker notes Eve's need "to try, to taste, / to take into the body" this life-sustaining knowledge. The result of this activity is also chronicled. Alliteration in these lines forecasts the harmonious relationship that will emerge during this process between self and world. As the mind engages in the act of understanding and interpreting, as it casts "the chips into patterns," the white facets of each piece of information break into colors. Here Piercy suggests that one's world will gain depth and color through the process of gaining knowledge.

The second stanza reinforces the lure of knowledge acquisition, recognizing the power of this process to blow "a horn in the ear / of belief." Knowledge can challenge the personal, the "dead languages" of Jewish orthodoxy, as well as the universal, as it helps pose "real questions into the still air / of the desiccated parlor of stasis." Tradition regards these questions as "nasty and difficult brats" challenging "what we all know to be true, constant." Yet the speaker argues that consistencies are desiccated or frozen, "like frost landscapes on a window." Each experiment, like Eve's biting into the apple, that "dares existence" by posing real questions brings steam to melt the frost. Questions like those that examine instincts and behavioral patterns, the speaker suggests, can debunk old myths that impose conventional notions of a woman's place or of her abilities. Consistency leads to death; the active mind's persistent examination and interpretation of the world leads to life.

Piercy illuminates the dehumanizing consequences of stasis in her third stanza in which she juxtaposes Adam's actions in Eden with those of Eve. Adam, initially the obedient servant to God's decrees, wags his tail like a "good dog," expecting praise and reward for shying away from the forbidden fruit while Eve and the serpent "shimmy up the tree," ready to face the penalty of their rebelliousness. Piercy extends the metaphor of the experiment here, the questioning that must occur if understanding is to be gained, as Eve and the snake become "lab partners in a dance of will and hunger." Eve questions God's decree that the knowledge obtained by eating the apple should be denied her. Revealing the strength of the female spirit, she refuses to allow her will, in this case her hunger for knowledge, to be suppressed and so joins the snake in a quest for freedom.

The speaker notes that this act in itself involves a double challenge to tradition. Eve challenges God's control over her as well as conventional notions of what women want. In a clever play on the symbolism of the serpent, the speaker scoffs at the established

conviction that women are interested in the body, the phallic "snake," and not the mind, "when it is the world she's after." Here, Piercy debunks the myth of Eve as temptress, insisting that her "thirst" is "not of the flesh but of the brain."

Eve suffered the consequences of her challenge to authority when God banished her from paradise and decreed that she and her female descendents must endure the pain of childbirth. The speaker insists that this suffering would lead to an ultimate state of freedom. By eating the apple and facing the consequences of her actions, Eve experienced "the birth trauma for the first conceived kid / of the ego"□the brain engaged in the active pursuit of knowledge. Piercy insists that women cannot exist without this dynamic engagement with the world, without the constant "kick[ing] of the tree" of knowledge to make the apples fall to the ground, without the participation in the quest to discover "who am I." She argues that women have the right to ask why the punishment for a woman's pursuit of knowledge was a death decree for her and all of her descendents.

In the final stanza, Piercy elevates Eve to the highest position in Jewish orthodoxy and celebrates her ancestral link to all women as the "mother of invention, / the first scientist." Eve becomes a "dynamic" symbol of life as a result of her experiment, "tasting, testing" experience. She ate the apple of knowledge, "like any other nutrient," rebelling against God's decree, which forced her to swim "against / the current of time." The speaker notes that this desire for knowledge, this "bright hunger," is shared by all women through their common ancestor.

Eve's heroic rebelliousness has survived throughout generations of women, "products of that first experiment." Piercy acknowledges that God punished Eve for eating the apple by banishing her from Eden and denying her and her descendents the gift of eternal life, which became "the worm in that apple." Yet she champions Eve for her independent spirit, which provided women with a greater gift□"freedom and the flowering of choice."

In "Apple sauce for Eve," Piercy acknowledges the bleak decree Eve and her descendents have suffered under as a result of her eating the apple of knowledge. Yet, the poem becomes a celebration of this inherited rebellious spirit that has inspired women to throw off the bonds of oppression. Jean Rosenbaum writes in her essay on Piercy's poetry in *Modern Poetry Studies* that "Piercy strikes out at the attitudes, institutions, and structures which impede natural growth and development and thus destroy wholeness." Piercy infuses "Apple sauce for Eve" with a hopeful perspective, of the spiritual renewal gained through the life-sustaining pursuit of knowledge.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "Apple sauce for Eve," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Research the traditional place of women in Judaism and in one other organized religion. How does the place of women in the two religions compare and contrast? Would the sentiments in "Apple sauce for Eve" be relevant if looked at in the context of the other religion you researched?

Some readers may consider "Apple sauce for Eve" an "accusatory" feminist poem, and others may find it a humorous feminist poem. What elements make you think its point is simply to accuse men of sexism, and what elements suggest humor or fun?

How would this poem be weaker or stronger if it used religious imagery throughout instead of scientific imagery? What is the advantage or disadvantage of relying on metaphors that come from a field so different from the main subject?

What does Descartes's famous line, "I think; therefore, I am," have to do with a feminist poem? Research the life of Descartes, and write an essay on what he meant by his comment and how it is or is not relevant to "Apple sauce for Eve."

What Do I Read Next?

Piercy's poetry collection *Colors Passing through Us* (2003) concentrates on what is valuable in her life: love, feminism, Judaism, politics, and sensual pleasure. She uses both humor and sorrow in writing about the transition into the twenty-first century, and she includes a moving piece on loved-ones who suddenly disappear, such as the victims of September 11, 2001.

Like Piercy, Alicia Ostriker is a contemporary feminist poet from a Jewish background who does not shy away from addressing matters of womanhood, sexuality, and Judaism in her poems. Her fairly comprehensive collection *The Little Space: Poems Selected and New, 1968—1998* (1998) provides a thorough look at thirty years of her work, showing both the natural maturity of a poet as well as deep-seated convictions that withstand the test of time.

Voices of Thinking Jewish Women (2003) includes intriguing essays from forty-two successful women in the fields of science, politics, literature, history, finance, feminism, entertainment, government, and more. Edited by Prudence Wright Holmes and Doris B. Gold, this collection of diverse thought and perspective covers topics as wide-ranging as the Holocaust, Zionism, sexism, war, civil rights, and financial matters.

Piercy maintains a personal Web site at http://archer-books.com/Piercy/ with more than thirty links to book reviews, critical essays, interviews, and excerpts of her work, as well as personal pages, including her resume, biography, and an up-to-date schedule of readings and workshops. For a general introduction to the poet and her work, this is a good place to start.

Editor Joyce Antler collected the works of four generations of women authors in *America and I: Short Stories by American Jewish Women Writers* (1990). The twenty-three stories, including works by Tillie Olsen, Cynthia Ozick, and Edna Ferber, depict what it means to be both a woman and a Jew, with topics ranging from the Holocaust to emerging sexual and emotional freedom.

Further Study

Piercy, Marge, *Circles on the Water: Selected Poems of Marge Piercy*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1982.

Published more than twenty years ago, this book has never been out of print. It is arguably the best overall introduction to Piercy's poetry, including some of her best-known work on heartfelt, often controversial topics. Titles include "Barbie Doll," "Rape Poem," "Right to Life," and "For Strong Women."

□□□, *Sleeping with Cats*, William Morrow/HarperCollins, 2002.

This is Piercy's memoir in which she openly and honestly reflects on many aspects of her life, from love and marriage to creativity and death. A lover of cats, she uses them here to help divulge her innermost feelings. In the book, she notes, "Cats continue to teach me a lot of what is important in my life, and also, how short it is, how we need to express our love to those for whom we feel it."

Rodden, John, "A Harsh Day's Light: An Interview with Marge Piercy," in *Kenyon Review*, Vol. XX, No. 2, Spring 1998, pp. 132—43.

In this lengthy interview, Piercy discusses her political beliefs, her thoughts on Judaism, her involvement in the radical movement of the 1960s, and several other personal opinions. She relates most of the topics to an overall feminist agenda, both personal and political.

Walker, Sue, and Eugenie Hamner, eds., *Ways of Knowing: Essays on Marge Piercy*, Negative Capability Press, 1991.

This is a well-rounded collection of writings on Piercy's work by critics from wide-ranging perspectives, but most critics applaud the poet's strong feminist voice.

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Taylor, John, Review of *What Are Big Girls Made Of?*, in *Poetry*, Vol. 171, No. 3, January 1998, pp. 221—24.