The Blue Rim of Memory Study Guide

The Blue Rim of Memory by Denise Levertov

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Some critics consider Denise Levertov's poem "The Blue Rim of Memory" one of the many written about her mother's death in Mexico that make up much of *Life in the Forest*, in which it first appeared in 1978. While this may well be the case, the poem could also reflect the poet's thoughts on any sorrowful occasion, as her mother is not specifically mentioned in it, and the images described would be as effective, regardless of the particular event. The poem is wholly metaphorical and divided into four primary images, each describing "the way sorrow enters the bone." Levertov turns to a historical reference□appropriate in discussing the concepts of memory□and to the natural world□specifically, fire, fish, and snow□to express the presence of sadness as it persists in the human mind, soul, and body. Both the message of the poem and its clarity depend on the beauty of language and the power of creating a sharp picture in the reader's mind to exemplify what sorrow feels like. In each of the four instances portrayed, the reader is offered a sensory experience to consider, a provocative image detailing how sorrow operates in memory.

"The Blue Rim of Memory" was also published in *Poems 1972-1982*, which compiles Levertov's books *The Freeing of the Dust* (1975), *Life in the Forest* (1978), and *Candles in Babylon* (1982). This book was released by Levertov's former publisher, New Directions Press, in 2001.

Author Biography

Denise Levertov was born October 24, 1923, in Ilford, England. Her Russian-born father had converted from Judaism to become an Anglican priest in England, and her Welsh mother was artistically prolific as a singer, painter, and writer. Levertov and her older sister were schooled at home by their mother, and their upbringing in a highly intellectual, well-read family had a tremendous influence on their adult vocations. The parents were also political activists, protesting fascism in Spain and Germany and providing aid to political refugees during World War II. Their involvement in social justice issues gave direction to their daughters' involvement with similar causes later on.

As a teenager, Levertov took ballet, piano, and art lessons, and at nineteen she entered nurses' training and worked as a civilian nurse during World War II. During the war, Levertov met her future husband, American soldier Mitchell Goodman, who had studied at Harvard. They were married in 1947 and moved to New York City where their son was born two years later. Levertov had been writing and publishing poetry since she was a child, and her first collection, *The Double Image*, was published in 1946. However, being a wife and mother and adjusting to her new life in America occupied her for the next eleven years, and her second volume was not released until 1957. During this time, she continued to write and to publish single poems, and her former highly structured British style of writing underwent an American transition in both idiom and subject matter. Her major influences were William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, as well as Black Mountain poets Robert Creeley and Charles Olson.

During the 1960s, Levertov went on reading tours, served as poetry advisor for the *Nation*, and taught at a variety of colleges and universities, such as City College of New York, Vassar College, and the University of California, Berkeley. Also during the 1960s and into the 1970s, Levertov became heavily involved in Vietnam War protests, and many of her poems reflected her political and social justice beliefs. Some of them were controversial, and she found herself both adored and hated by readers and scholars on either side of the issues. "The Blue Rim of Memory," which first appeared in her collection *Life in the Forest* (1978), was not among these political poems, for it expresses no political persuasion. In her later years, Levertov continued to teach, holding positions at Tufts University in the 1970s and Brandeis and Stanford Universities in the 1980s. Levertov and her husband divorced in the early 1970s, and she eventually moved alone to Seattle, where she died at the age of seventy-four on December 20, 1997.

Levertov is considered one of the most prominent and prolific poets of the twentieth century. She received a Guggenheim Fellowship, an American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters grant, the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, and an NEA Senior Fellowship, among several other awards. Upon her death, Levertov left forty finished poems, which her literary executors published as *This Great Unknowing: Last Poems*, in 1999.

Poem Text

The way sorrow enters the bone
is with stabs and hoverings.
From a torn page
a cabriolet
approaches over the crest of a hill,
first the nodding, straining head of the horse
then the blind lamps, peering;

the ladies within the insect eagerly
look from side to side awaiting the vista□
and quick as a knife
are vanished. Who were they? Where is the hill?
Or from stoked fires of nevermore
a warmth constant as breathing hovers out
to surround you, a cloud of mist
becomes rain, becomes cloak, then skin.

The way sorrow enters the bone
is the way fish sink through dense lakes
raising smoke from the depth
and flashing sideways in bevelled
syncopations.
It's the way the snow
drains the light from day but then,
covering boundaries of road and sidewalk,
widens wondering streets
and stains the sky yellow
to glow at midnight.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

The first line of "The Blue Rim of Memory" sets up the premise for all the images and events that follow throughout the poem. Everything from this point on will be a description of "the way sorrow enters the bone," and the poet will rely on metaphors to get her point across. Line 2 generalizes the specific images that are about to come, suggesting that sorrow is sometimes felt quickly and can be as painful as the "stabs" of a knife. At other times, it seems to linger on the sidelines of a person's thoughts and emotions, an ever-present grief that permeates the memory.

Lines 3-5

These lines open the first of four central metaphors in the poem, and the most extended one as well. "From a torn page" implies that this image is like one taken from a book, a moment alienated from the rest of the story. The scene described is reminiscent of eighteenth-century transportation. A "cabriolet" is a two-wheeled, one-horse carriage with room for two people and a top that folds down. Today, they are popular for sporting newlyweds around city streets as part of the wedding celebration, but in "The Blue Rim of Memory" the cabriolet is a strange, even haunting figure from long ago. Perhaps representing sorrow, it "approaches over the crest of a hill," more like a suspended, hovering entity than a quick, sharp stab.

Lines 6-7

These two lines simply embellish the image of the cabriolet. Anyone who has seen a horse pulling a carriage can picture the animal's "nodding, straining head," and anyone who has seen a movie set in the eighteenth century or earlier, recognizes the "blind lamps, peering" from the darkness, apparently held out by the riders.

Lines 8-9

The fact that there are "ladies" riding in the carriage (a cabriolet here resembles a humpy "insect" with long feelers up front) may be inconsequential, and the poem would work the same if the inhabitants were two men or a man and a woman. The only significant reason for placing two women here instead may fall in line with some critics' belief that this poem is Levertov's reflection on her relationship with her mother and her sorrow over the older woman's death, which occurred a year prior to the release of *Life in the Forest*. Line 9 suggests that the ladies are anxious about their surroundings and apparently unaware of what lies ahead, for they are "awaiting the vista," or distant view.

Lines 10-11

These two lines close out the first metaphor and include an allusion to the general description in line 2 regarding the way sorrow "stabs" its victims. Here, the ladies, the horse, and the cabriolet all disappear "quick as a knife," much like some painful memories that creep into the mind and then evaporate when some other thought or action interrupts. The questions "Who were they? Where is the hill?" echo the elusiveness of memories that, like "torn pages," seem incomplete, having little purpose other than instigating grief as a person contemplates why they come and where they go.

Lines 12-13

Line 12 is the beginning of the second central metaphor in "The Blue Rim of Memory." Notice that it begins with the word "Or," expanding on the dynamics of memory and sorrow set forth in lines 1-2. In other words, line 12 picks up where line 3 left off: "From a torn page . . . / Or from stoked fires of nevermore." But this time, instead of a horse and carriage approaching, it is "a warmth constant as breathing" that "hovers out." Note the correlation between "hoverings" in line 2 and "hovers" in line 13. The gist of these lines 12-13, then, is that the human mind is often like a land of "nevermore," of things forgotten or dormant until its "fires" are "stoked" and memory rushes back like a warm breath suddenly exhaled.

Lines 14-15

These two lines finish the second metaphor and describe how the "warmth" in line 13, which represents sorrow or memory or both, surrounds the individual like a "cloud of mist." But the mist turns heavy and suffocating as it "becomes rain, becomes cloak, then skin." Sorrowful memories, it seems, may begin lightly and innocently enough, but they can gradually become so consuming that they feel as tight as one's own flesh, as though sorrow is a physical part of the human being.

Lines 16-20

These five lines make up the third central metaphor in the poem. Line 16 is simply a repetition of line 1, but this time the way sorrow gets into the bone is compared to "the way fish sink through dense lakes." The "smoke" in line 18 is probably the cloud of sand or mud that rises when one touches the bottom of a body of water, and the image makes a nice tie-in with the smoky imagery of stoked fires and clouds of mist in the previous stanza. Like sorrow, fish do not often move in a direct line but shift back and forth in "beveled / syncopations," just as painful memories shift about in one's mind, never quite uniform or predictable.

Lines 21-24

Line 21 is the beginning of the fourth and final central metaphor in "The Blue Rim of Memory." The idea of grief's heaviness and suffocating power comes up again here, as sorrow is now compared to snow that can turn daylight suddenly dim with thick clouds and blinding precipitation. Once the ground is covered in a blanket of white, one can no longer distinguish the "boundaries of road and sidewalk," or anything else for that matter.

Lines 25-26

The final two lines of the poem complete the fourth metaphor and offer at least a glimmer of hope from beneath the smothering snow. Since boundaries have disappeared, once narrow streets now seem wider, and the sky that went dark during the daytime now appears bright in the nighttime because of the reflecting snow. Anyone who has witnessed a heavy snowfall knows how the outdoors appears "to glow at midnight," and, in keeping with the metaphorical allusion, perhaps this image suggests that the sorrow that has entered the bone is not necessarily as dark and debilitating as what may at first have been presumed.

Themes

The Impersonal as Personal

In the introductory note to *Life in the Forest*, Levertov discusses the influence that the work of Italian poet and novelist Cesare Pavese had on her own poems in this collection. Addressing his 1936 publication of *Lavorare Stanca* (Hard Labor), Levertov notes that "Pavese's beautiful poems are about various persons other than himself; though he is a presence in them also, their focus is definitely not autobiographical and egocentric." She admires Pavese's "concept of suggesting a narrative through the depiction of a scene, a landscape, rather than through direct recounting of events as such," and she admits wanting to accomplish the same in her current work. "The Blue Rim of Memory" is a testimony to her success in this endeavor.

There is no "I" in this poem, nor is there a "you" or any indication that a specific person is being addressed. Yet, there is an intensely personal *feel* to the poem, something that draws one in and allows a reader to identify with the circumstances it describes. What may usually be considered an element of style, then, becomes a thematic issue in this poem. Levertov's message depends strictly on third person, seemingly impartial depictions of landscapes and nature□the eerie presence of a hill crest over which a cabriolet approaches, a cloud of mist and rainfall, snow-covered streets, and fish sinking into dense lakes. But the underlying meaning is not impartial at all. Perhaps an autobiographical factor comes in if this poem is about the death of the poet's mother, but, even if a specific event is not at the heart of it, the sentiment is just as strong, just as intimate as if it were. Levertov's imagery is vivid and provocative, touching on scenes and encounters that most everyone has witnessed or experienced firsthand. By using four very different yet very powerful metaphors to portray the same emotion, she shows how connections can be made between the personal and the impersonal through graphic depictions instead of diary-like narrative. Like Pavese, she accomplishes heartfelt meaning with objective representations. Though her own grief□whatever its source□is not directly proclaimed in this poem, its overwhelming presence is unmistakable.

Sorrow

The most obvious theme in "The Blue Rim of Memory" is the human response to sorrow. In this case, the response is more indirect than blunt, as made clear in the use of metaphors to express it. But whether one makes a candid statement about mourning a loss or implies grief by describing a cloud of mist that becomes rain that becomes a cloak that becomes skin, the message is arguably the same. Sorrow is painful, often suffocating the spirit and emotions. Sometimes it is only a dull, lingering discomfort, but it has the potential to suddenly and sharply overwhelm like a knife wound inflicted by memory.

The title of this poem suggests that the sorrow that it addresses is not based on something that has just happened or that has happened very recently. Instead, it is *memory* that evokes sadness and *memory* in which the sorrow resides. Perhaps the concept of sorrow immured in memory elicits the dichotomy of soft, pervasive and instant, intense sorrow that is depicted in the poetic metaphors. Time and distance work in the poem to both buffer initial pain, represented in the uneasy stillness of certain imagery, and create the potential for the piercing sorrow of memories suddenly recalled. Sorrow, then, sits at the "blue rim" of memory, just on the edge, where its presence is felt, but is not always intrusive. Many humans may experience grief in this way, especially after the passage of time when reflection and contemplation have replaced shock, anger, or depression. Levertov's take on it is not only beautifully poetic but realistic, as well.

Style

As noted previously, Levertov's attempt in *Life in the Forest* was to write in the objective, thirdperson style of Cesare Pavese, omitting sentimentality, emotionalism, and autobiography. Not all the poems in this collection reflect any success with her ambition, but "The Blue Rim of Memory" does. It is considered a lyric poem because it is still personal without being obviously autobiographical, and it still offers a heartfelt contemplation of its subject without lapsing into pathos. The poem is presented in third person, start to finish, and contains no rhyme nor contrived meter or rhythm. The language, however, is strongly *poetic*, not lending itself to being turned into prose by simply writing it in paragraph form. Many contemporary lyric po- ems can stand that test, reading like passages from a book as well as poems. But Levertov's later work maintained some of the earlier, more stylized poetry she produced while living in England. The language in "The Blue Rim of Memory" may not be quite as stiff as early-twentieth-century poetry or certainly anything from the Victorian period, yet it is chock-full of carefully selected, tight images and intentional connections between metaphors with the repetition of specific words or allusions. For instance, "hoverings" as a noun in line 2 compares to "hovers" as a verb in line 13, and the "stoked fires" of line 12 shift nicely into "raising smoke" in line 18, even though the latter image is actually a description of sand in a lake bed. The reference to the horse-drawn cabriolet and the "blind lamps" gives this poem a historical feel and adds to its restrained poetics. That restraint is softened by the lushness of the metaphors and the easily pictured events that they represent.

Historical Context

On a small scale, the decade of the 1970s was a time of personal change in the subject matter of Levertov's poetry, and, on a large scale, these were years of sometimes odd, sometimes benign change. In America, the 1960s were unprecedented in their all-encompassing antiwar, free-love, politically radical themes, and some of that carried over into the 1970s. But by the middle of the decade - after the Vietnam War had ended, Richard Nixon had resigned, the Watergate scandal finished its media blitz, and the rock-and-roll sounds of Vanilla Fudge and the Rolling Stones gave way to the disco beat of the Bee Gees and Donna Summer - many Americans were left disillusioned by their own government's clandestine activities and doubtful that the fiery, high-minded social missions of the previous decade held any real value for the doubting, unenthusiastic members of this generation. As a result, many social activist flames were snuffed, and political writers like Levertov turned to more personal, less volatile issues to create their work. The decade of the 1970s, however, was not without at least a few of its own themes, though most generally get credited back to the 1960s or cast forward to the more memorable 1980s.

The social and political liberalism that dominated the country beginning in the early 1960s was fueled primarily by many people's belief that an American presence in Vietnam was unjustified and, ultimately, futile. Along with antiwar protests, other causes spurred citizens into action: from Civil Rights to the Women's Movement, ecology to cosmology, politicians, students, housewives, farmers, and university professors all found a reason to have their voices heard in a very clamorous society. After the war, many of those issues remained just as vital, but many of their supporters seemed to run out of steam. Vietnam veterans returned home bitter and emotionally shattered, not only because of the horrors of war they had experienced but also because of the less-than-warm welcome they received from the folks back home had protested the war. Hippies got older and got jobs. By the mid-to-late-1970s, many of them had traded in their love beads and bell-bottomed jeans for leisure suits and offices in corporate America. Some former left-wing radicals even softened their liberal views, turning more toward the conservative, family-oriented values that would dominate the country in the 1980s. The decade of the 1970s, it seems, was one of transition more than anything else.

However, the shift to conservatism in the latter part of the 1970s is not likely due to the fact that radicals had grown up but was spurred mainly by political foreign policies and the economy at home. The rising American economy of the previous decade was assumed to go hand-in-hand with making the improvements in society that people were in the streets carrying placards to support. This type of economy was also believed to enhance expanding overseas markets, including opening doors to trade with communist or socialist states typically considered unlikely partners in trade. Many Americans were still under the illusion that post-World War II prosperity was so great that it could support new social programs at home, expand foreign markets, and still maintain an anticommunist crusade, at least in theory, if not in practical economics. Unfortunately, they were wrong. By the end of the decade, the U.S. economy was faltering, overseas expansion was coming to a halt, and domestic reforms were all but over. As a result,

disillusionment in previous high ideals caused some Americans to reevaluate their political stances, essentially paving the way for the Reagan years of the 1980s.

On a lighter note, the 1970s are remembered for spawning some of the shortest-lived music, dance, and dress fads in modern America. While many hardliners never gave up their Levi's and rock-and-roll, a trendier set climbed into platform shoes, glittery dresses, and wide-lapel, polyester suits and danced all night to the highly rhythmic, drum-and-bass-centered sounds of disco. When *Saturday Night Fever* hit movie theaters in 1977, disco's popularity soared, and John Travolta's signature dance-king stance - legs spread wide, one arm up, one arm down, a finger pointing triumphantly skyward - became the fastest copied pose of "fever fans" across the country. Like most pop-up fads, however, the thrill soon waned, and by the early 1980s, disco music and leisure suits were little more than the butt of late-night TV comedians' jokes. Unfortunately, many events of this decade wound up with the same dubious honor, but the same case could surely be made for years prior to and after the infamous 1970s.

Critical Overview

From her early, tightly-structured poetry written in England to her more Americanized verse, which spanned the latter half of her life in the United States, Levertov's creative work is some of the most well respected, highly praised to come out of the twentieth century in both countries. While some critics cast doubts about her liberal delving into political poetry in the 1960s and early 1970s, even this work grabbed attention, if more so for its controversial subjects and accusatory tones than pure poetics. In the final two decades of her life, Levertov settled into quieter, more spiritual themes, essentially bringing to the front the religious beliefs and contemplations on God that many critics saw lurking in the background of her earlier work as well. Her "middle" collections□those published in the late 1970s and early 1980s□are transitional, revealing the mellower tone and meditative spirituality, yet they are not wholly religious in nature. *Life in the Forest* is one of those transitional books, and it was met with praise when it came out in 1978. Writing for the *National Review*, critic N. E. Condini says that in Levertov's poetry "there's an insistence on the need to watch nature as it incessantly recreates life. . . . This concept is taken up again in *Life in the Forest*, where the two main themes of the previous collection□mother and the forest symbol□ stand for the inevitability of death and the permanence of creation." Also picking up on the nature-life death theme, critic and poet Diane Wakoski, writing in *Contemporary Poets*, notes that

> this worldliness is the source of a belief in some primal deep reality, or other-worldliness, underlying her materialism. . . . [In *Life in the Forest*] she reveals her vision of a jungle world which is always out there, ready to reassert itself as soon as the ephemeral hand of civilization relaxes.

Over the nearly fifty years of Levertov's writing career, critics have spent more time studying, analyzing, and contemplating the poet's themes, metaphors, and styles rather than just criticizing them. This by itself is a testament to the truly evocative work Levertov continued to produce from the 1940s through the 1990s. Not many poets publish even half the number of volumes that Levertov did, and very few of those who do manage to retain the interest of critics and readers, book after book after book. Levertov was□and still is□an exception.

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 makes a case for Levertov's poem being honored with the title of the "perfect" poem - keeping the dubiousness of that word in mind.

Rarely does one find a poem about which there is nothing negative to say. That is, most poems can stand some criticism that offers viable suggestions for improvement: stronger clarity, less verbiage, more descriptive language, not so much didactic finger-pointing. These are common grounds for complaints from critics, and poets have simply learned to live with them and decided individually whether to heed any outside advice. Although Levertov was undeniably one of the most respected poets throughout her poetic career, her work has had its share of negative comments, particularly those generated by the more volatile poems she published during the Vietnam War. Controversy makes good fodder for leveling opinions about opinions. Most levelers consider their own beliefs and theories *right*, giving a poem little chance of being left alone as it was written. "The Blue Rim of Memory" is a rare poem for these reasons. It is not controversial nor didactic nor full of unnecessary words. One could hardly ask for more descriptive language, and it takes only a careful reading and some term definitions to make its message effectively clear. In short, this poem is as close to perfect as one can get.

The three primary aspects of "The Blue Rim of Memory" that make the poem work so well are its strong vocabulary, its cohesiveness, and the ability of its overall meaning to make a reader contemplate it for some time. Metaphors, similes, and various other figures of speech are all common, useful ways of enhancing any kind of writing, and they are especially effective in poetry where much can be said in a small amount of space. Vocabulary is the key to communication, and Levertov demonstrates a beautiful mastery of it in this poem. With highly descriptive language, she comes at her topic - sorrow - from four different angles, each expressing what sorrow feels like from the remote perspective of things that do not even experience the emotion. The mysterious scene she portrays with the cabriolet and unknown riders who peer from it with their lanterns extended does not need further explanation to make it applicable to the message. Sorrowfulness is implicit here - in the darkness, in the furtive glances, in the sudden disappearance of the entire scene. The speaker's questions of "Who were they? Where is the hill?" are merely rhetorical, for an answer need not be given to get the point across. Similarly, the second image carries its own air of mystery while still evoking sadness and one's inability to escape it. How "a warmth constant as breathing" gradually becomes suffocating does not need to be spelled out, for the words that describe the process are plain enough: "a cloud of mist / becomes rain, becomes cloak, then skin." These descriptors, in the order they are presented, summarize quite aptly the progression from looseness to confinement.

The final two images in "The Blue Rim of Memory" are just as precise and evocative as the first two, and they also rely on the power of figurative language to make an impact.

Hardly could back-to-back images be more unalike than those of fish sinking into a lake and heavy snow disguising the "boundaries of road and sidewalk." But, as different as these scenarios are, they have something very poignant in common: both imply a kind of smothering, suffocating feeling. While fish do not drown in "dense lakes" and sidewalks do not die beneath deep snow, words like "sink," "raising smoke," "drains," and "stains" illuminate what sorrow - here portrayed as water and snow - can do to a human being. It "enters" stealthily, softly, hiding the true deadliness of its nature until the lake overtakes its victim, the snow buries the unsuspecting. These images are stark and satisfying. They need nothing more to express their sentiment.

"The Blue Rim of Memory" may contain diverse metaphors that seem worlds apart in the mental pictures they conjure, but they are held together by a verbal cohesiveness that gives the poem an overall *tight fit*. Levertov uses a remarkable manipulation of language to move from one image to another, sometimes even skipping over several lines and still providing a smooth transition between phrases. For instance, note how line 3 is tied directly to line 12: "From a torn page" is essentially continued with "Or from stoked fires of nevermore." More obviously, of course, is the repetition of line 1 in line 16 and the use of the words "hoverings" and "hovers" to create a bond between the two very different images in which each appears. Also, in each metaphor, there is a sense of mystery and things hidden or just beyond comprehension. The first scene, which appears to be straight out of the eighteenth century, offers no explanation for its enigmatic portrayal of two ladies riding in a cabriolet and their strange approach "over the crest of a hill." Most odd is that they suddenly disappear, along with the carriage, horse, and the hill itself. The reason for their presence remains unknown, but their initial *approach* implies that the purpose is there, but just out of reach.

The cryptic nature of the second metaphor is more subtle than the first, yet its premise is shrouded in the "cloud of mist" that it describes. The word "nevermore" is both archaic and foreboding, and the phrase "breathing hovers out" evokes a sense of apprehension and uneasiness. There is also a question of who the "you" is that becomes surrounded by breath, mist, rain, a cloak, and, finally, skin. Perhaps the reference is only generic, denoting any human being, or perhaps it is the reader or a specific person the poet has in mind. Maybe it is even herself, addressed in second person. Frankly, the identity is unimportant to the message. Regardless of who the "you" refers to, the situation in which the individual finds himself or herself is rather eerie and, again, just beyond total understanding.

The third and fourth metaphors in this poem deal with enigma in a slightly different manner, this time invoking scenes of the natural world, both animal and landscape. *Obscurity* plays the key role here. Imagine peering into a lake trying to see how deep it is or whether there are fish swimming in it. Visibility is usually very limited, but Levertov makes that point unmistakable by calling the lakes "dense" and having the fish raise "smoke" as it sinks to the sandy bottom. Obviously, one could not see anything in such conditions. Like dense water, heavy snowfall also affects visibility, and once it covers the ground, all that lies beneath it is hidden, obscuring natural boundaries. The mysteriousness in this final metaphor is implied through the image of a yellowish sky glowing at midnight. It may be a common view on a snowy winter night, but there is an

eeriness to the scene as well. The firmament appears too dark to be daytime and too bright to be nighttime, but lies somewhere in between, just out of the grasp of either. While each of the four metaphors in this poem portrays a sense of strangeness and incomprehension in various ways, the overall tie-in of the images makes it cohesive in its tone, presentation, and meaning.

Finally, it is the meaning that makes "The Blue Rim of Memory" leave a lasting impression in most readers' minds. Sorrow is one of the most common of human emotions and likely one of the most understood. One *knows* why people cry, why people become sad, regretful, and depressed: death, illness, loss of love, loss of a job, violations against human rights, famine, violence, loss of a pet, failure at achieving a goal, and the list could go on and on. Perhaps what one does not know is how to look at it from an angle other than dead-on. Sorrow seems to need no explanation except for its source to be named. Some critics believe Levertov's source for this poem was her mother's death, and perhaps that is true. But, it is never mentioned. Instead, the reader catches glimpses of the sad mental state in "bevelled / syncopations" like fish swimming sideways through water. The perspective is not one-dimensional, but deepened, rather, into layers of viewpoints, stimulating the intellect as well as the emotions. The poem may not leave one cheerful or warm, but neither does it leave one bored or disappointed. Instead, it makes the reader *think* - think about sorrow from a new angle, think about the mind's process of dealing with sadness, think about feelings that lurk somewhere inside, unable to rest or to go away. In short, the poem fascinates, in the strongest sense of the word.

"The Blue Rim of Memory" is not one of Levertov's most recognized poems, nor does it show up in anthologies of great American or English literature. In fact, it is safe to assume that very few people are familiar with it at all. This is unfortunate, for - at the risk of seeming doting and fatuous - this poem could make those who read poetry only by force perhaps give the genre a fairer chance, and it could, of course, validate the love of the craft some academics and non-academics already feel for it. So is this poem perfect? Admittedly, *perfect* is a chancy word, and not much lives up to it. The contention here is that "The Blue Rim of Memory" has a fighting chance, if anything does.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "The Blue Rim of Memory," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Partch is a Jungian astrologer, writer, and graphic designer. In this essay, Partch considers the mystical orientation that Levertov brings to the discipline of poetry.

In "The Blue Rim of Memory," Denise Levertov wastes no time in building subtly to her point and little or no interpretation is required in even the first reading of the poem. By the third word of the first line, the reader knows exactly what this poem is about: sorrow.

The poem proceeds in a manner where it zeros in on the sensation of sorrow, while simultaneously distances from any accompanying emotion. Because of this duality, the poem never quite yields its detachment to the point of sympathy or detaches to the point of total abstraction.

Levertov brings the phenomenon of sorrow, as it is in and of itself, into such sharp relief that the particulars become irrelevant. Such narrative questions as, what sorrow? Which sorrow? Whose sorrow? Sorrow over what? Who caused the sorrow? The source is not important and neither is the context.

This close, disciplined cropping of the frame forces a more intimate look at the specific experience of sorrow, as a distinctly human experience - as universal, natural, and inevitable as breathing. The close focus suspends judgment or rationalization mid-sentence. Left in the astonished state of recognition, the reader is invited to consider how sorrow, once within the realm of experience, informs life from that point forward. Does it, as Levertov suggests in her final image of falling snow, make day darker and night lighter? Does this particular loss of innocence perhaps dampen joy and simultaneously lighten subsequent sorrows? Is this what it means to move out of childhood's bliss?

These are the questions left to consider, beyond the particularization of the experience. Levertov is more concerned with evoking the distinct sensation of sorrow than explaining or even describing it, let alone answering the ultimate burning question of why. The images employed are neither sad nor personal. They reach beyond sentiment, beyond emotion even, and beyond interpersonal relations and situations. There is no protest against human action or fate, no cry of injustice or remorse. There is just the simple fact of this experience entering the bone, a condition as eternal as day passing into night.

Levertov's poem offers only the strictest attention to the sensation of the knowing of sorrow, sorrow that is here to stay. Levertov does not proffer the hope that it will season and temper its host like fine wine, if one is very good or wise or lucky; nor does she warn that it may char or curdle if not. Readers have entered a realm beyond the solace of comprehension or redemption. This is a realm of pure phenomenon, of pure experience, beyond the reach of reason. Where reason leaves off is where faith picks up, if one can push through that stubborn membrane. This is where Levertov is taking

her readers, through the borderline of rationality, across the threshold of the intellect, and through the void of despair on the other side.

This kind of detachment, from personal identity and context, often tends toward dissociation altogether into the surreal, into completely disembodied abstraction. But this poem permits only one lapse in this direction, in the second stanza, where the image of a cabriolet suddenly veers off the page, into a Edward Gorey-grotesque cartoon landscape, and readers glimpse "the ladies within the insect."

This one exception contrasts Levertov's otherwise consistent use of concrete imagery from nature. Here, readers can recognize the mind's tendency in moments of crisis and severe shock to juxtapose the absurdly comic with horror. For the most part, however, the concreteness and simplicity of the poem's imagistic analogies mitigate against floating off into the surreal dissociation of the bizarre, and the poem's evoked recognitions are very much anchored in the real - nearly in the physical body itself.

There is a certain acceptance of the naturalness of sorrow in its very inevitability. There is no conditional *if*; there is only the ineluctable *when*. However, this acceptance does not constitute a lesson or a moral or embody an attitude. It is simply acknowledging a fact of life, a fact of unalterable natural law, honoring its existence by painting its portrait as vividly as possible, with words calling forth images that form familiar but startling analogies.

This matter-of-fact acceptance of experience has come to strike the modern Western sensibility as rather "Zen" in its detached, compassionate examination. Is this quality not a legitimate claim to the poet's natural place? While Levertov's mature personal spirituality re-clothed itself in the Christian traditions of her youth, her work seems to transcend categorization. One can see traces here and there in her work of various traditions; here a little Buddhism, there a little Kabbalah, here a Gnostic streak. Indeed, as Levertov's path at various points in her life has wandered through each of these gardens, it has gathered their various hues and shades and depths along the way.

As the function of the mystic is not to seek analysis or conclusion but to deepen the sense of mystery, this poem may raise more questions than it answers, which, in this tradition would definitely be seen as a good thing.

The first two lines describe the workings of the poem: "The way sorrow enters the bone / is with stabs and hoverings."

The poem itself brings sudden moments of startled, piercing awareness, intermixed with its more oblique, subtler realizations: "a cloud of mist / becomes rain, becomes cloak, then skin."

So it is with sorrow as well. It comes quickly *and* slowly; in sharp increments penetrating to the core *and* in gradual layerings over time. Sorrow becomes a part of one's being and a part of one's *experiencing* from that point forward. Perhaps the blue rim (memory) is the lens through which experience must from now on filter as it penetrates and ultimately becomes self.

Knife and mist are alchemically combined in the final stanza:

fish sink through dense lakes
raising smoke from the depth
and flashing sideways in bevelled
syncopations.

It is the startling use of familiar, everyday, and otherwise innocuous images against the field of the subject of sorrow that creates the confluence of content and form and a sense of awe-inspiring mystery. It could be thought of as a higher order of onomatopoeia, almost like a pun between image and meaning, which sets the mystical imagistic poets apart from their more sentimental or prosaic cousins. Levertov's colleague Robert Creeley asserted in Levertov's *The Poet in the World* that "Form is never more than an extension of content," to which Levertov added (also quoted in *The Poet in the World*, "Form is never more than a *revelation* of content."

Some might say it is the function of any art to join the life of the inner self with the inner life of the outer world, but it is without question the task of Levertov's poetic tradition. As she put it so succinctly herself in her "Appreciation" of H. D.'s work, Levertov is concerned with "the interplay of psychic and material life." For Levertov, a poem is a record of the moment-by-moment interaction between consciousness and natural phenomena, whether they be wholly inner experiences or encounters with the outer world of nature.

In "The Blue Rim of Memory," readers see a master at work, confidently and quietly sculpting, summoning the very mystery of existence into being. People may never know the why of any of it - why people are alive, why people feel, why people love, why people gain, why people lose - but the fact that people are alive and do experience at all is miracle enough, as Denise Levertov reminds us in this stabbing and hovering meditation on the human experience of sorrow.

Source: Marjorie Partch, Critical Essay on "The Blue Rim of Memory," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Adaptations

A video recording of Levertov reading from *Evening Train* and selected unpublished poems was produced by the Lannan Foundation in 1994. This is a VHS tape, titled simply as *Denise Levertov*, which runs sixty minutes.

Go to the W. W. Norton web site at http://www.wwnorton.com/trade/multimedia.htm to hear Levertov read her poem "Tenebrae," which appeared in the *To Stay Alive* collection and is one of her protest poems about the Vietnam War.

Topics for Further Study

Which do you prefer—poems like "The Blue Rim of Memory" that are strictly objective, third-person descriptions or more personal, autobiographical poems that seem to tell a story? Tell why you like one over the other and explain the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Why do you think the scene with the cabriolet is effective in this poem? What does it say about the time period in which these carriages were popular, and how does evoking something historical relate to sorrow?

Metaphor is one of the most common ways that people use to describe their feelings or to make someone understand how a thing may look, sound, taste, and so forth. What would be the effect on communication if metaphor did not exist? How may it change the way you try to tell someone your feelings?

Write a poem based on "The Blue Rim of Memory" in which you come up with four *more* ways that "sorrow enters the bone." Remember: use third-person descriptions only—no I, me, we, or you.

Compare and Contrast

1970s: The last American troops leave Vietnam as North Vietnamese troops complete their Communist takeover of South Vietnam. The unpopular, largely unsupported conflict costs more than 56,000 American lives and sharply divides the country at home.

Today: American troops in Afghanistan and other hotbeds of terrorism throughout the world are greatly supported by their own nation and many others, as countries across the globe unite in the war on terrorism.

1970s: The world's last known case of smallpox appears in Somalia, and the deadly disease is considered eradicated when it does not appear for two more years.

Today: Pharmaceutical researchers scramble to create smallpox vaccines to protect Americans from the threat of biological terrorism in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and subsequent cases of anthrax poisonings.

1970s: In a sorrowful and bizarre religious cult display, Jim Jones and over nine hundred followers drink Kool-Aid spiked with cyanide and die in a mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana.

Today: Suicide bombers and suicide hijackers spread terror throughout the world under the guise of martyrdom and religious fundamentalism.

What Do I Read Next?

Editor Christopher MacGowan collected *The Letters of Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams* and published them in 1998. The correspondences cover Levertov's first few years in New York City and her two years in Mexico, and they reveal a coming-of-age as she grows from a worshipful student writing to her mentor into Williams's self-confident colleague in the field of poetry.

Upon her death, Levertov left a notebook containing forty finished poems that show the poet's creative genius active right up until the end. *This Great Unknowing: Last Poems* was collected by her literary executors - who left the poems in the same chronological order in which they found them - and was published by New Directions Books in 1999.

The recent publication by Susan Roos called *Chronic Sorrow: A Living Loss* (2002) explores the natural grief reaction to losses that are not final but continue to be present in the life of the griever. The book addresses feelings of sorrow from a lifelong perspective and discusses its effects on those who see no end to their grief.

The second edition of editor Andrew Ortony's *Metaphor and Thought* (1993) expands this collection of stimulating essays on the function of metaphor in human language and thought. Most discussions are very readable to the non-philosopher and non-psychologist, and the overall sentiment is that using metaphor to describe reality is a vital part of the human ability to communicate and to understand.

Further Study

Levertov, Denise, *Poems 1972-1982*, New Directions Books, 2001.

This book collects three of Levertov's volumes that were published in succession during the ten-year period mentioned. They include *The Freeing of the Dust* (1975), *Life in the Forest* (1978), and *Candles in Babylon* (1982). It is interesting to read the poems that Levertov wrote for the collections that appeared on each side of *Life in the Forest* and to compare their use of metaphor to that of "The Blue Rim of Memory."

Marten, Harry, *Understanding Denise Levertov*, University of South Carolina Press, 1988.

This book is part of the *Understanding Contemporary American Literature* series, written for both students and nonacademic readers. It provides an insightful look at Levertov and her work in chapters such as "The Poet in the World: Private Vision and Public Voice" and "Deciphering the Spirit□People, Places, Prayers." The latter includes a discussion of *Life in the Forest*.

O'Connell, Nicholas, *At Field's End: Interviews with 22 Pacific Northwest Writers*, University of Washington Press, 1998.

This collection contains Denise Levertov's final interview before her death in 1997. In it, she discusses the egotism that pervades much modern poetry, her feelings on the sacredness of writing, and what she sees as the spiritual hunger of an American society that depends so heavily on technology.

Rodgers, Audrey T., *Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Engagement*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993.

This book is a beautifully written exploration of Levertov's work, taking the reader through her early "English" poetry, through the turbulent 1960s, and on to the more contemplative, spiritual poems of the 1970s and 1980s. This is an excellent read for anyone interested in Levertov's work.

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Condini, N. E., "Embracing Old Gods," in *National Review*, Vol. XXXII, No. 6, March 21, 1980, pp. 360-61.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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