But Perhaps God Needs the Longing Study Guide

But Perhaps God Needs the Longing by Nelly Sachs

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

When Nelly Sachs first began to write, she wrote of the longing for a lover and of the disappointment of lost love. After her experiences during the Holocaust, most of Sachs's poems dealt with the destruction of European Jewry. She used her poems to express the deep sense of loss and grief that she felt and as a form of catharsis for the many emotions that she had experienced during the war years. Although Sachs escaped the death camps, her escape did not leave her immune to the suffering of those Jews who were transported. Although she had been brought up in a non-religious, secular household, the experience of the Holocaust deepened Sachs's commitment to Judaism. Many of her poems, written after the war, reflect this deepened commitment to religion. This is certainly the case with "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," (first printed in 1966 in *Die Suchende*) a poem in which the writer poses a reason for the inevitability of death and the grief that results from the loss of love. This poem appears in a chapter of *The Seeker and Other Poems* that is titled, "In the Habitations of Death," in which Sachs writes about the death camps. The dominant theme of "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," is that of death. In this poem the poet expresses both the inevitability of death and the cycle of rebirth that are equal parts of life. One theme of "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," suggests that the prayers of longing and grief that result from death create the light of stars in the night sky. These stars represent the continuing cycle of birth and death that are part of man's existence. The conclusion of the poem might be viewed as an affirmation that there is life after death, since the grief and longing that mankind feels perpetuates the memory of those who have been lost. The visual representation of this grief and the remembering of those lost can be seen in the birth of new stars.

Author Biography

Nelly Sachs was born Leonie Sachs on December 10, 1891. She was educated in Berlin, the only child born into an upper-class, liberal family. Her parents, William Sachs and Margarete Karger Sachs, were fully assimilated into German life and had largely abandoned their Jewish traditions. Indeed, many of Sachs earlier works include references to Christianity, rather than to Judaism. Sachs's father was an inventor and industrialist and her mother did not work away from home. Sachs did not adjust well to school and so she was educated at home, where she learned about literature, music, and dance. The Sachs family was musical; the father played the piano and Sachs danced for her parents. Perhaps because she did not attend school, Sachs had few friends and spent most of her time in the company of her parents. She rarely spoke about the details of her childhood, and so little is known about this part of her life. There was apparently an unsuccessful romantic attachment for a man when Sachs was only a teenager, and her various biographies allude to this man's unsuitability, but there is no solid information about the affair or why it ended. The end of this romance has been cited as the impetus for when Sachs began to write poetry at the age of 17. The next piece of information about Sachs's life refers to her father's death in 1930. Sachs was still living at home with her parents at the time, and she continued to remain at home where she cared for her mother.

At some indeterminate point, Sachs began a correspondence with the Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf. Then in 1939, as the Nazis were closing in on Sachs and her mother, she was offered a refuge in Sweden. Lagerlöf had interceded with the Swedish authorities and requested permission for Sachs to emigrate after another friend, Gudrun Harlen, had actually traveled to Sweden to make the arrangements. Sachs had already been ordered to report to the Nazi authorities and a labor camp when the offer of sanctuary arrived. She and her mother escaped Germany in May 1940 on the last passenger flight to leave Berlin for Stockholm. In leaving Germany, Sachs was also forced to leave behind all of her family's financial resources.

During the next thirty years, she lived an austere existence in a Stockholm apartment, earning a living translating the works of other writers from Swedish into German. During some periods of this time, Sachs suffered a nervous breakdown, was institutionalized, and was treated for depression, but even so, she continued to write.

The events of the Holocaust also kindled Sachs's interest in Judaism, and she became much more religious later in life. Sachs's first work, *Legenden und Erzaehlungen* (legends and stories dedicated to Selma Lagerlöf) was published in Berlin in 1921. This first work was a collection of stories from the Middle Ages. She did not publish any additional books until after the war ended, and when she did, her subject matter had changed. Her second book, *In den Wohnungen des Todes* (*In the Dwellings of Death*,) was published in 1946. Many more books of poetry followed, as well as what is considered to be her most important play, *Eli: Ein Mysterienspiel vom Leiden Israels* (*Eli: A Mystery Play of the Sufferings of Israel*), which was first performed in 1951. "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing" is taken from her 1966 book, *Die Suchende* (*The*

Seeker, translated and published in English in 1970). In addition to several other prizes for her writing, Sachs was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1966, an honor that she shared with S. Y. Agnon. Sachs died in 1970 in Stockholm.

Plot Summary

Overview

Sachs's poem, "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," articulates a reason for why grief and loss fill the world. The poem explores the universality of birth and the inevitability of death. The poet suggests that death and grief are expressions of prayer that leave their earthly bounds and fill the night sky with the light of stars. The poem also reasons that grief and longing are important in keeping the memory of loss alive. Longing is the unseen representation of grief, but the stars are the way in which longing makes grief visible. When those who are lost continue to be remembered, their existence continues, even though they no longer exist on an earthly plane.

Lines 1—2

The first two lines of Sachs's poem begin with the articulation of the first of several queries. The first question asks if God needs the desire, the yearning of mankind. The object of this feeling is unspoken, but the implication is mankind, and so the poet asks if God needs man to feel a yearning, a desire for what has been lost. But it is also unclear in this first line what it is that mankind is intended to desire. Instead of "longing," perhaps God needs the "prayers" of mankind, but to what end? For Sachs, the word longing articulates a desire to move beyond the boundaries of life. What it is exactly that the poet desires will not be revealed until later in the poem, and thus this first line projects a universal desire with which all readers can identify□the desire to escape the losses of this life, the boundaries that restrain mankind. The second question in the first line is tendered by the phrase, "wherever else should it dwell." In other words, where else might these prayers or desires exist if not in this world? What other destination remains for the accumulation of longing that exists in the world? This first line questions the very essence of existence by asking to what purpose does man exist in God's world.

Only a partial answer is forthcoming in the second line. The visible evidence of longing□the "kisses and tears and sighs" that reveal yearning□is unseen. Mankind's yearnings, instead, fill "mysterious spaces of air," whose location cannot be determined. The poet speculates that perhaps all the unfulfilled desires or prayers of mankind might be in the air that mankind breathes. Where else, the poet asks, does this longing go? Later in the poem, the reader learns that the longing of the first line of the poem exemplifies the need for solace and the relief of pain felt at the loss of love. The "longing" is an expression of grief at the experience of death. Religious dogma suggests that prayers leave an earthbound existence to fly up through the air and stars until they find their destination in heaven. Sachs's poem articulates this journey that prayers must take on their journey to God and offers the suggestion that it is the longing that creates the visible stars of the sky.

Lines 3—4

The speculation of line two is continued in line three when the poet suggests that mankind's prayers might provide the matter from which stars will grow. The poet suggests an alternative to the scientific study of the origin of stars and instead offers a more philosophical and religious solution to mankind's questions about the night sky. Prayers are the sustenance of growth. While loss will leave mankind filled with longing, that longing journeys forth to create a new world in the heavens. The world is nurtured through prayers, with even the stars depending on mankind's prayers for nourishment and rebirth.

The poet's questioning continues in the fourth line, in which the poet speculates that the very air and sky that envelop mankind's longing also contain the response that is sought from this yearning. Whose voice is that which answers mankind's prayers? It is God who offers a response and a promise of reunion, but the reunion occurs as each person dies. The grief and longing at each death become a part of the night sky and thereby joins those who have already been lost. The line also suggests an escape from the turmoil of existence that can be found among the stars of heaven. The idea of a return to God and the promise of a better existence are common tenets of religious faith. Such reliance on the promise of a better world is especially common in periods of great turmoil.

Lines 5—6

In line five, the poet finally suggests a focus of the yearning that the first line articulates. This fifth line is addressed to "my beloved." Since there is no specific mention of the individual, the line suggests that the beloved is meant to signify a universality of love that is recognizable to all readers. Instead of a lover for whom the poet yearns, the beloved is, instead, the representation of all love that has been lost. And so the question posed in line five is a universal representation of lost love and the longing for a loved one. The poet suggests that it is the longing of mankind for a loved one that leads to the creation of the stars. As a loved one is taken in death, it is the grief of those left behind that creates the stars and planets. A glance at the stars spurs the poet to ask if those very stars were created from the prayers of longing that have escaped mankind.

In line six, the poet continues the question posed in line five. If mankind's longing has created the stars in the sky, perhaps those sighs of longing, first mentioned in line two, have created the world in which man exists. The "cradle for life and death" is mankind's own existence, which is beyond the control of individual men. The act of breathing creates life, just as the cessation of breath signifies death. This existence is beyond mankind's direct providence, just as the creation of the stars are only a by-product of the prayers that make their way upward to heaven. The substance of man's existence is insignificant in a world so large.

Lines 7—8

Line seven articulates the ideas that were only suggested in lines five and six. The "grains of sand" make clear the smallness and insignificance of mankind. As the poet makes clear in the preceding line, death is as much a part of mankind's existence as is birth. Mankind is "dark with farewell," suggesting the darkness of grief and the prayers of longing that define man's existence. And yet the poet counters this darkness of thought with the notion that mankind's prayers lead to the birth of the sky. All those stars that light the night sky are the "secret treasure trove" of births that reveal that so many prayers of longing have not gone unanswered. The final line, then, reflects on the events that influence the poet's life. The deaths of so many have created a sky filled with stars, and so she acknowledges the inevitability of death and of grief for those lost. The grief of longing, the prayers for comfort and solace that escape mankind, will create even more stars and planets in the sky as still more death and loss fill mankind's world.

Themes

Birth and Death

Sachs's poem, "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," explores the universal longing and grief that human beings experience at the death of a loved one. This universality of emotion is expressed in both the title and the opening line and is expressed even more clearly in line five. The "beloved" represents all of those who have died and left loved ones to mourn their loss. The poet also suggests that "in the sky of longing," there is also the opportunity for rebirth. The longing for those whom death has taken creates "worlds [that] have been born of our love." Sachs's poem acknowledges the cycle of birth and death that manifests itself in all of nature. Sachs simply takes the idea one step beyond the customary exposition to suggest that grief is not an empty emotion; instead, man's grief is felt in the heavens, and the result of this grief is the birth of a new star that represents the longing for a lost life. The final word of the poem reminds the reader of the cyclical nature of life and death. The wreath is by definition a circle, without beginning and end. Death, too, is without end, since it is the longing, the memories of those left behind, that will keep the dead alive. Each star in the sky is proof of an individual life and death.

Existence

In line six, the poet explores the meaning of man's existence. The visual expression of life is the unconscious act of breathing. Breathing is an innate action that accompanies birth. The poet refers to mankind's "breathing, in and out," as the essence of existence. The cessation of breath reveals the end of life. This notion of inevitability is captured in the last line of the poem, when the poet recognizes that all who have existed will eventually die. The idea that existence is precarious is suggested by a phrase in line seven: "We are grains of sand." Grains of sand are too minuscule to be counted, except by great effort, and thus the counting is without end. A grain of sand, an individual life, might be overlooked but not if mourned by someone who loved that person. The promise of an eternal existence lies within the same line. It is "births' secret treasure trove" that promises a life after an earthly death. Human existence, then, continues, although perhaps only in the memories of those left behind. The repetition of the word "perhaps," found in lines one, three, five, and eight, suggests only the possibility of continued existence but it also reflects the poet's hope that existence shall continue even after death.

Grief

The palpable emotion of "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing" is the expression of grief. This poem, like the many others that are included in *The Seeker and Other Poems*, is about living with so much death. The poet's grief at the death of so many

people is expressed in the reference to the stars. Each star represents the longing and grief for a life lost. Stars, though, are without number. They are so infinite as to be uncountable. The poet's use of stars as a metaphor for lost lives is intended to suggest the depth of loss that the writer feels at so much death. The grief at the loss of life is too vast for any representation that might be accountable with numbers. The "grains of sand" phrase in line seven also represents a number too great to count, and thus a grief too vast to describe. At the same time, the poet expresses a sense that such grief is not without benefit. The visible expression of all this grief is the night sky that continues to illuminate the earth, and so mankind can never forget the loss represented in the heavens above.

The Holocaust

The events of the Holocaust provide the defining image in Sachs's poetry. It is impossible to grasp what six million dead actually means. The number is too large to make sense. This is the fact that Sachs acknowledges in "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing." The many references to images without number, the stars and grains of sand, all refer to numbers without meaning. Human beings cannot count the number of stars or the number of grains of sand, nor do they attempt to do so. And yet each of the six million Jews who died were sons and daughters, mothers, and fathers, husbands and wives, grandparents and siblings. Each death was an individual who was loved and who was mourned. Sachs's poem is rich with allusions to the unlimited emotion of grief that is felt at so great a loss. The poet seeks to find some solace in the idea that the grief from so much loss was not without meaning. The poem offers the suggestion of eternal life in the memories of those who do not forget. One important response to the Holocaust is the Jewish cry to action: Never forget. The demand that the events of the Holocaust never be forgotten has become the mantra of twentieth-century Jewish thought. Sachs acknowledges this mantra with her reminder that each star is a representation of grief and that as long as there is remembrance, there will be more stars, the "future moons, suns and stars" that form the circle of memory. The six million dead of the Holocaust will not cease to exist as long as grief at their loss continues to be felt.

Style

Imagery

Simply put, imagery refers to the images suggested by a poem. The relationships between images can suggest important meanings in a poem. With imagery, the poem uses language and specific words to create meaning. For instance, Sachs uses imagery to demonstrate the cycle of life and death. The wreath is a circle without beginning and end. Birth and death are the cyclical representations of nature. Each birth must end in death, but the dead are not forgotten, according to Sachs, since they remain alive in memory.

Metaphor

A metaphor is an analogy that identifies one object with another and ascribes to one object the qualities of a second object. The metaphor may be simple, as with a single comparison, or the metaphor may be much more complex, as in Sachs's case, where most of the poem functions as a metaphor. Sachs uses the stars as a metaphor for lost lives suggesting that each star is formed from the grief felt at a death. The stars metaphor allows Sachs to make grief a visible entity that everyone can see and acknowledge.

Parallelism

Parallelism refers to a repetition in style or words within the poem. This stylistic device is a means to express several ideas of similar importance in a similar manner. For example, Sachs uses parallelism of word choice, the word "perhaps," to reinforce the notion that memory might ward off death by keeping alive the memory of those who have died. This use of parallelism focuses the reader's attention on this word and signifies that this repetition is an important element of the poem.

Poetic Form

The word poem is generally assigned to mean a literary composition distinguished by emotion, imagination, and meaning. But the term *poem* may also fit certain designated formulas, such as a sonnet or a couplet, which are defined by length and or a rhyme scheme. A poem may also include divisions into stanzas, a sort of paragraph-like division of ideas, and may also include a specific number of stressed or unstressed syllables in each line. Sachs's poem does not make use of a set number of syllables per line, and does not employ specific defining characteristics, as does a sonnet; however, her poem does meet many of the other elements that define poetry, especially the notion of compactness and concreteness of language. Every word in Sachs's poem suggests an image or idea, and nothing is wasted. Modern poetry has moved from the

strict formulas of the early poets, but even the contemporary poet still strives for an impassioned response to his or her poem. And like the earliest poetry, modern poetry is still highly individualistic.

Question

The question in poetry, which is often a rhetorical question, does not always require an answer, but the posing of the question can provide an interesting means for the poet to attract the reader's attention. Sachs uses several questions; in fact, she opens her poem with the first of several questions. Sachs's questions lead the reader to search within the poem for answers. Her questions, then, serve to focus the reader's continued attention on the poem.

Rhyme

Rhyme is the correspondence of sound based on a terminal sound between accented syllables often located at the end of a line that involves both a vowel and a consonant sound. In Sachs's poem, "dwell" and "swell" rhyme lines one and three, with identical sounds. This type of rhyme is a masculine rhyme or a rhyme where the corresponding sounds are restricted to the last syllable. Rhyme can be used to unify a stanza, but in Sachs's one-stanza poem the rhyme scheme ties the poem together linguistically. Sachs uses a simple rhyme scheme of alternating lines, ababcdcd. Rather than using couplets, the alternating rhyme is less tiresome for the listener and adds more interest to the poem.

Historical Context

Pre-Holocaust Life

Although Sachs's poem, "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," was included in *The Seeker and Other Poems*, the actual date of composition of the poem is unknown. The copyright notes that several of the poems in this book had previously been published, but there is no individual notation about the date of composition for any of the poems. Yet the influences on the poem are very clear. Sachs's poetry reflects the devastation of the Holocaust on her life, which began with a series of oppressive laws that heavily restricted her life. After Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1933, he began a series of moves that would segregate Jews from mainstream German life. The first of these actions began in 1934 when Hitler demanded that all artists must glorify Nazism. Hitler created the House of German Art in Berlin, and then condemned many of the most creative people in Germany as degenerate. In response, many of Germany's artists and writers fled Germany, leaving Berlin bereft of many of the city's greatest artists. By 1935, Hitler and the Nazis had instituted the Nuremberg Laws, a series of laws that restricted Jewish life. Jews were no longer German citizens, even though many Jewish men had fought for Germany during World War I. Jews were also forbidden to marry German citizens or to have any sexual relationship with a German. Hitler declared that the Aryan race, which included the Germans, was the most superior of races, while the Jews were the lowest of all races, barely equal to animals.

Under the new laws, Germans were forbidden to associate with Jews and not permitted to do business with Jews. Jews could no longer work in public service and were not allowed to vote. They also lost all government pensions and were forbidden to teach at universities. Jewish children were not permitted to be educated with German children. Eventually Hitler ordered that all Jews leave the country, but few were able to find a country that would admit them, especially since they were also penniless after the Germans had confiscated all their money and goods. Although Sachs and her mother were not observant Jews, Hitler's new laws did not distinguish Jews based on religious practice; instead, Hitler defined Jews by race. Anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent was considered a Jew. By 1938, the persecution of Jews, destruction of their property, and the arrest and transportation to camps within Germany had begun. By 1941, the systematic extermination of Europe's Jewish population was underway. By the time Sachs was finally able to find a way to escape, she had already received a letter ordering her to report for deportation.

Post-Holocaust

Word that Europe's Jewish population was being murdered had begun to be heard years before the end of the war. But the whispered rumors were too extreme to be believed by many people. However, after the war ended and the first camps were liberated, word of the destruction and of the annihilation of so many lives became more

widely known. For Jews who had survived, as Sachs did, the knowledge was especially difficult. Many Jews who survived the death camps were wracked by guilt, but many of the Jews who had escaped, as well as those whose families had perished, were consumed with anguish at the enormity of loss. Many people were unable to visualize the loss of so many people. Although six million Jews had perished, another five million individuals, who were labeled as undesirables, also died. Many of Sachs's poems deal with the incomprehensible images of so much death. Sachs's poetry uses the metaphor of numberless stars and grains of sand to try and define the deaths of eleven million people, but her very metaphor makes clear how impossible it is to visualize so much death.

After the war ended, Sachs remained in Stockholm. Only a few of Germany's Jews decided to return to Germany after the end of war; most were like Sachs, with little money and no property left to claim. All that they had owned prior to the war had been taken, and many Jewish survivors lived in poverty, as did Sachs, who rarely left her Stockholm apartment. It is the events of the 1930s and 1940s that haunts Sachs's poetry. The images of so much destruction and death in that period are frequently found in her poetry. "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing" is only one example of how events of this period influenced Sachs's work for the rest of her life.

Critical Overview

Sachs's books have been largely ignored by the critics, but that does not mean that there have not been some critical studies of her work as a whole. Sachs is most often studied as a Jewish writer and as a survivor of the Holocaust. Her work, then, is studied along side those of other Jewish women writers, whose Holocaust experiences shape their work. It is only recently that the poetry and prose of Holocaust survivors have found an audience of willing readers. In fact, it took a long time for critics to discover Nelly Sachs. In her essay, "Women as Agents of Suffering and Redemption in the Poetry of Nelly Sachs," writer Erlis Glass Wickersham points out that Sachs's "artistic contributions to twentieth century poetry may have been unjustifiably neglected." In fact, as Wickersham observes, while books of Sachs's poetry have been published for many years, there have been no definitive editions of Sachs's poetry and only after 1990 did biographies begin to appear. At this point, none of these recent biographies have been published in English and most of the critical work on Sachs continues to be available only in German. Wickersham's own study focuses on the maternal images that are present in Sachs's poetry, but she also notes the many references to astronomical entities, an example of which can be seen in "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing." While many of Sachs's poems explore the death camps and the destruction of humanity that occurred in the camps, she does not limit herself to the spacial limitations of those camps. Wickersham mentions that Sachs "extends her vision outward," away from the limitations of the traditional family, and "into a new world." The images of a "common humanity" in Sachs's poetry are what Wickersham sees as the transformational effect of these poems.

Wickersham is not the only critic to study Sachs's work. In his text, *The Poetry of Survival: Post-War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, Daniel Weissbort contends that Sachs was unable to separate herself from the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust. Weissbort argues that "the reality in Sachs's almost Biblical poetry of lamentation is the sheer physical pain of loss." Weissbort also points out that in time, Sachs was able to see "the suffering of the Jewish victims in a wider context of death and renewal." That image of death and renewal is the dominant theme in "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing." Sachs's preoccupation with death may also have been a result of her own narrow escape from the Nazis in 1940. In her essay on Sachs, "The Search for Identity: Nelly Sachs's Jewishness," Ruth Dinesen asserts that Sachs's "personal experience of the closeness of death, her grieving participation in the dying and death of her loved ones and of the many people unknown to her" had a profound effect on Sachs's life and on her work. Dinesen also tells of how important the word *Sehnsucht* (longing) would become in Sachs's poetry. Dinesen suggests that Sachs had always wanted to move beyond preconceived boundaries, a desire that "is articulated in her poems as stretching over the edge of life." The word "longing" is a central part of "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," since it signifies the desire to move beyond the confines of earthly pain.

Sachs's books of poetry are out of print in the United States, although they can still be found occasionally in used bookstores. In addition, English translations of literary criticism of her work remains scarce.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Metzger has a doctorate in English Renaissance literature and teaches literature and drama at the University of New Mexico. She is also a professional writer and the author of several reference texts on literature. In this essay, Metzger discusses how Sachs's identification with Jewish suffering and representations of genocide are transformed into healing images that transform grief in Sachs's poem.

Nelly Sachs is not the only Jewish writer who has used poetry to try and understand the events of the Holocaust and the destruction of European Jewry. The Nazi desire to destroy an entire culture and the people who were that culture's literal representations has confounded historians and social scientists since the scale of destruction was first uncovered in the 1940s. The resulting outpouring of literary writing that has dealt with the Holocaust is enormous. Many Jewish women survivors have written of their experiences in prose memoirs, and while it is true that these memoirs are able to capture the events and emotions of this period, they can only rarely find meaning in an event that so clearly defies understanding. Sachs is one of the few Jewish women writers who used poetry as a way to express her anguish and outrage at this destruction. For Sachs, the Holocaust was an event that would permeate her poetry with images of death and sorrow.

Sachs's life was filled with loss. As an only child, who was educated at home, her life was controlled within the narrow parameters of family. Sachs never married and never left home until forced to do so by the Nazis. In the space of only five years, she lost both her father and her cultural identity. Her father's death in 1930 was followed by the establishment of government-sanctioned anti-Semitism in Germany. Even though the Sachs were fully assimilated Jews, who were more Christian in practice than Jewish, the family suffered under the 1935 Nuremberg Laws that took away German citizenship and heavily restricted the freedoms of Jews. Within a few years, Sachs and her mother had lost their home and property. They were at the mercy of friends who were able to secure the family's escape from Germany just as Sachs was about to be deported to a labor camp where she would certainly have died. The family had lost everything and arrived in Stockholm as penniless refugees. By the time Sachs and her mother arrived in Sweden in May 1940, all that Sachs had ever known was gone.

At this time, Sachs was 48 years old and was no longer a German; instead, she had become a Jew, something about which she knew nothing. In her essay on Sachs's quest for identity, "The Search for Identity: Nelly Sachs's Jewishness," Ruth Dinesen begins her study by focusing on Sachs's early development as a writer. Dinesen notes that the poet had always thought of herself as a German writer and not a Jewish woman writer. In fact, the subjects of some of her earliest poems were Catholic saints. Dinesen points out that Hitler's leadership "had cast her [Sachs] out of the German community and into a group of persecuted people who were forced to think of themselves as Jews, and to make the best of it." Yet Sachs did not think of herself as a Jew. She knew no Hebrew and knew nothing about Jewish culture or religion, but as a poet she was expected, as Dinesen suggests, to write about Jewish topics. As it happens, Hitler made

this easy, since one way for Sachs to find an identity as a Jew was to identify with Jewish suffering.

An essential part of Jewish identification is to live as part of a Jewish community. As a Jewish refugee in Sweden, Sachs became a part of the suffering that European Jews were enduring. Dinesen writes that Sachs's

loss of identity as a German, her personal experience of the closeness of death, her grieving participation in the dying and death of her loved ones and of the many people unknown to her renew Nelly Sachs's complete isolation and loss of orientation in her Stockholm exile, a situation from which she rescues herself only by accepting a Jewish identity.

Her identification with Jewish suffering not only made Sachs a part of the Jewish community, it gave her an identity as a Jew that would become an essential part of the poetry she would write. According to Dinesen, Sachs identifies so closely with the history of the Jewish Diaspora that she considers herself "a part of the dispersed and persecuted Jewish people, who are entrusted with a special God-given task." For Sachs, the task will be to use her poetry to try to heal the pain of all the death and suffering that surrounds her. A significant part of this healing is Sachs's search for life beyond the boundary of death.

In her poem "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," this need to expand boundaries is represented in the image of the creation of new stars. It is the grief that is experienced at so many deaths that creates the "invisible soil from which roots of stars grow." In Sachs's poem, grief is not just limited to the "kisses and tears and sighs" that respond to loss. She wants to create images that move beyond the familiar. If each star represents the memory of grief felt at a death, then each lost life will live again in the night sky. Instead of death, life is created from sorrow. Dinesen suggests that Sachs's search for life beyond the boundaries of death is not simply a religious experience but is, instead, the need to move beyond preconceived boundaries. This desire to expand boundaries is designated in Sachs's poems as "longing," a recurring theme in her poems, and is the need to find meaning in life after loss. An example of Sachs reliance on "longing" can be taken from the first line of "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," when the poet poses the rhetorical question from the title. This opening line signifies the importance of the word "longing" and directs the reader's attention beyond the question in the first line and to the necessity of grief as a part of memory.

Sachs's use of "longing" should not be read in the same context as it might be in society today when longing is often associated with the desire to possess something that one does not have. Nor is the poet simply longing for death. In his essay on Sachs's poetry, "Nelly Sachs: The Poem and Transformation," Johannes Anderegg points out that in Sachs's poetry, the word "longing" takes on new meaning. Anderegg suggests that "longing" is for Sachs

inscribed into all wandering, all life; it is the expression of being-under-way; it belongs to a path that leads to death□and longing is therefore surely also the hope, indeed perhaps the certainty, that this path is a path to God.

Sachs's longing, as expressed in her poetry, is for another world without pain and sorrow. Anderegg notes that in some of Sachs's poetry, this "longing is connected with a movement that overcomes gravity and rises above the earth," as it does in "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," when longing is the impetus that creates new stars. Dinesen also notes that Sachs's use of "longing" reflects a need to "cross all boundaries, which is articulated in her poems as stretching over the edge of life." As both Anderegg and Dinesen have observed, Sachs wants to expand the universe to find a place of solace and solitude, a place of healing and hope. In some of her poems, she does this with references to the oceans, while in others she moves out into the universe, as she does with "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing." In her use of stars as a way to assuage grief, Sachs offers a healing that falls outside the conventional religious view of death and the afterlife. The solace from grief is not built upon an idea of being reunited with loved ones after death. Instead, Sachs offers a way to reunite with the living through the transformation of grief. The profound grief that is felt at the revelation of so much death is transformed in Sachs's poem to worlds that "have been born of our love." Sachs escapes the boundaries of death and offers healing in the night sky. All who grieve, then, are bound together by the stars that cover all earthly people.

One cannot underestimate the impact of the Holocaust on Sachs's poetry, and yet, her poetry is not only focused on images of pain. In her book *Ethics and Remembrance in the Poetry of Nelly Sachs and Rose Ausländer*, Kathrin M. Bower describes how Sachs felt the need to use her poetry to give voice to the events that had happened in Europe. Rather than making her poems about the individual, as she might well have done since she had also suffered much, Bower suggests that Sachs "wished to subordinate herself as an individual survivor to the collective mass of victims with whom she so strongly empathized." It is the many, who have suffered and who continue to suffer, whose sorrow can be found in the grief that creates so many stars in the sky, and it is the many whose grief is captured in "grains of sand" too numerous to count. Sachs felt that it was memory that would best preserve those who had been lost, just as she also saw herself as the means to voice so much sorrow. In her poem "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," Sachs suggests that memory is held in the stars created by grief. Bower describes Sachs as intent on becoming a "vessel for the sufferings of her people." As noted above, Sachs's identification with Jewish culture was as a witness and participant to Jewish suffering. One way for Sachs to accomplish her immersion in the Jewish community was to use her poetry as a way to address the effects of genocide. She chose to do this by demonstrating the common humanity of mankind, expressed through a universal grief at the genocide that the Jews had experienced.

In Sachs's poetry, and notably in "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," which is discussed in this essay, the poet universalizes the experience of Jewish suffering to create a poem that finds hope and healing for those who grieve. As Dinesen, Anderegg, and Bower have all noted, Nelly Sachs was a poet who used her poetry to escape the boundaries of earthly pain. Through her images of grief transformed into stars, the poet

is able to suggest an escape from sorrow and a place of solace for readers who seek escape from the knowledge that the destruction of millions was created by mankind. Sachs never forgets the basic humanity of man and finds that poetry can transcend earthly boundaries defined by unbearable pain.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, Critical Essay on "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Topics for Further Study

Mankind can learn much about how people adapt to change and to economic pressure by studying how society changes in response to these economic pressures. Research life in Berlin during the 1920s and the 1930s. Compare these two periods carefully. What do you think are the most significant social changes to occur during this period?

Locate at least two or three poems by Rose Ausländer, another German Jewish woman poet. After you have read Ausländer's poems, compare them to at least two or three of Sachs's poems. How are these poems alike? How are they different? In what ways do both Ausländer and Sachs capture the Holocaust experience? Be sure to use lines of poetry to support your findings.

Some historians have argued that women were better able to adapt to the new laws and oppression that governed the lives of German Jews. Research the experiences of Jewish men and women in pre—World War II Germany. Explore what life was like during this time and form your own argument about which gender was better able to adapt and survive.

In the past twenty years a great many memoirs of Holocaust survival have been published. Read at least one of these memoirs (Etty Hillesum's *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork* is a good choice) and compare how a writer's prose reflections compare to those of a poet, such as Nelly Sachs. What do you think are the most significant differences between the prose account and the poetry text? Is one kind of memoir more effective than another at capturing the events of this period? Be sure to use textual quotes to support your argument.

Compare and Contrast

1940s: Many Jews are deported from Germany to camps in the east, many to the camp called Auschwitz in Poland. In January of 1945, the death camp at Auschwitz is liberated by the Russian army. The Russians are so horrified by what they see at the camp that they shoot many of the German guards on the spot. The actual number of those murdered at Auschwitz is unknown and is estimated to be between one and two million people.

Today: After World War II, Auschwitz is destroyed. In its place, a memorial and museum are constructed. In recent years, an attempt to build a Christian religious sanctuary there results in protests from Jews who feel that only the memorial belongs on the land; eventually the project for the sanctuary is abandoned.

1940s: In April 1945, the allied forces circle Berlin, beginning a siege that lasts less than a week before the city falls. While Russian shelling demolishes the Reich Chancellery and the Reichstag, Hitler hides in an underground shelter. He commits suicide on April 30, 1945.

Today: In the 1960s, Berlin is divided with half of the city's inhabitants living in West Germany and the remainder in East Germany behind the Iron Curtain. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Germany is once again a united country.

1940s: In 1945, the United States drops two atomic bombs on Japan, at Hiroshima and at Nagasaki. More than 100,000 people are killed by the bombs, and many more people die later from their injuries and from exposure to radiation.

Today: The threat of nuclear expansion continues to concern people, who fear that another bomb would be used to destroy cities and people. Efforts to restrain the development of nuclear weapons have been largely unsuccessful and many countries such as Indian, Pakistan, and North Korea now possess these weapons.

What Do I Read Next?

Sachs's collection of poems *O the Chimneys: Selected Poems; including the verse play "Eli"* (1967) also contains the first play that she wrote.

Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs: Correspondence (1995), edited by Barbara Wiedemann, contains translations of the many letters that Sachs and Celan wrote to one another.

The Last Lullaby: Poetry from the Holocaust (1998), edited and translated by Aaron Kramer, is an anthology of Holocaust poetry with a strong focus on the loss of children.

Art from Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology (1995), edited by Lawrence L. Langer, is a comprehensive collection of Holocaust writing that includes fiction, poetry, drama, as well as journals and diaries.

Holocaust Poetry (1995), compiled by Hilda Schiff, is a collection of Holocaust poetry by men and women of all nationalities, languages, backgrounds, and experiences.

Further Study

Baer, Elizabeth and Myrna Goldenberg, eds., *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, Wayne State University Press, 2003.

This text contains a collection of essays that focus on the experiences of women during the Holocaust. Several of the essays examine the ways in which women nurtured one another and thus enabled their survival.

Dwork, Debórah, ed., *Voices & Views: A History of the Holocaust*, The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, 2002.

This text provides an unusual historical account because it is formatted as a collection of personal essays that explore both the events of the Holocaust and the impact and meaning of this period of history.

Rittner, Carol and John K. Roth, eds., *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, Paragon House, 1993.

This book is an anthology that is divided into three separate sections. The first section contains memoirs written by Jewish women who experienced the Holocaust. The second section provides a collection of essays that interpret the events of the period, from racism to resistance to moral choice. The final section contains essays that reflect on the events of the Holocaust.

Yahil, Leni, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932—1945*, Oxford University Press, 1987.

This comprehensive history of the years from 1932 to 1945 remains one of the most thorough examinations of this period in history. Yahil explores every facet of life, every political decision, and every action that had an impact on European Jews.

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Anderegg, Johannes, "Nelly Sachs: The Poem and Transformation," in *Jewish Writers, German Literature: The Uneasy Examples of Nelly Sachs and Walter Benjamin*, edited by Timothy Bahti and Marilyn Sibley Fries, University of Michigan Press, 1995, pp. 59—75.

Bower, Kathrin M., *Ethics and Remembrance in the Poetry of Nelly Sachs and Rose Ausländer*, Camden House, 2000, pp. 21, 127, 160.

Dinesen, Ruth, "The Search for Identity: Nelly Sachs's Jewishness," in *Jewish Writers, German Literature: The Uneasy Examples of Nelly Sachs and Walter Benjamin*, University of Michigan Press, 1995, pp. 23—42.

Sachs, Nelly, "But Perhaps God Needs the Longing," in *The Seeker and Other Poems*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970 pp. 24—25.

Weissbort, Daniel, in *Poetry of Survival: Post-War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, Anvil Press Poetry, 1991, p. 56.

Wickersham, Erlis Glass, "Women as Agents of Suffering and Redemption in the Poetry of Nelly Sachs," in *Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation*, edited by Esther Fuchs, University Press of America, 1999, pp. 63-87.

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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