Colibri Study Guide

Colibri by Ann Cameron

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Colibrí" first appeared in the *Americas Review* and is included in Martín Espada's bilingual second collection *Rebellion Is the Circle of a Lover's Hands*, published in 1990. Espada won the 1989 PEN/Revson Award and the Paterson Poetry Prize for the book. Like his other collections, *Rebellion Is the Circle of a Lover's Hands* gives voice to oppressed peoples, particularly Latinos, and demonstrates a historical awareness of the roots of oppression. Written in four short free-verse stanzas, "Colibrí," which means hummingbird, addresses the colonization by the Spanish of the Taino, the native people who inhabit what is now called Puerto Rico. Setting the poem in Jayuya, a city founded in 1883 and the place of a 1950 uprising, Espada uses crisp imagery and an extended metaphor to connect past to present and to evoke sympathy for the Taino. Espada's father is Puerto Rican and many of his poems address the island's history and its fight for independence.

This poem is a good example of Espada's ability to politicize his subject matter without sounding strident or condescending. He is able to do this by showing rather than telling readers about the Taino's situation. By focusing on the ways in which the Spanish conquered the Taino using language as well as guns, Espada universalizes the Taino's plight, suggesting that oppressed peoples throughout history have endured similar tribulations. The image of hands occurs in poems throughout the collection, particularly the hands of working-class people such as janitors and secretaries.

Author Biography

Former tenant lawyer, poet, and professor Martín Espada was born in 1957 in Brooklyn, New York, to a Puerto Rican father and a Jewish mother. He received his bachelor of art degree in history at the University of Wisconsin and a juris doctor degree in law from Northeastern University in Boston. Before working as a lawyer and advocate for the renting poor, Espada held jobs as a salesman, clerk, telephone solicitor, gas station attendant, bouncer, and bartender. Although Espada gave up his law career to devote himself full-time to writing and teaching, he did not abandon political activism; he merely changed the means through which he practices it. At a time when most poets have turned inward to explore the nuances of an angst-ridden self, Espada has turned outward, writing about the injustices done to other people and advocating change.

Espada began writing when he was sixteen, as a means of self-discovery and a way of coming to terms with the hostile community in which he lived. His poetry speaks out against poverty and racism while trying to avoid being strident or preachy□a failing of much so-called political poetry. Espada is a staunch advocate for Puerto Rican independence and has supported a number of other controversial causes, including the case of death-row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal. Poems such as "Colibrí," from his collection *Rebellion Is the Circle of a Lover's Hands* (1990), show rather than tell about the subjugation of the native people of Puerto Rico through clever metaphors and striking images.

Espada's poetry collections include *The Immigrant Iceboy's Bolero* (1982), with photographs by his father; *Trumpets from the Islands of Their Eviction* (1987); *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators* (1993); *Imagine the Angels of Bread* (1996), which won an American Book Award; and *A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen: Poems* (2000). He has also edited a number of collections, including *Poetry Like Bread: Poets of the Political Imagination* (1994) and *El Coro: A Chorus of Latino and Latina Poetry* (1997). In 1998, South End Press released his collection of essays, *Zapata's Disciple*.

Espada has received numerous awards for his work, including the PEN/Voelker Award for Poetry, the Paterson Poetry Prize, two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, a PEN/Revson fellowship, and a Massachusetts Artists Foundation fellowship. He is an associate professor of English at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

Plot Summary

First Stanza

"Colibrí" is set in Puerto Rico in the city of Jayuya. The city's name is derived from local Indian Chief Hayuya. Jayuya is tucked into the northern border of Toro Negro Forest Reserve and commands breathtaking views extending to the Atlantic and the Caribbean. Sometimes natives refer to it as "La Capital Indigena," to signify its large population of Taino.

Espada first compares the scattering of the lizards to the way that "green canoes" scattered "before the invader." This is a historical allusion to the 1493 Spanish invasion of the island, which natives called Borinquen.

"Iron and words" refer to guns and language, two of the primary tools the conquerors used to subjugate people. The Spanish named the native Arawak Indians Taino. When Espada writes that the Taino "took life / from the plátanos in the trees," he is describing how this banana-like fruit sustained them. The fruits resemble "multiple green fingers" in their shape and size. The rock carvings refer to the Taino written language, which was in the form of petroglyphs, or symbols, carved in stone.

Second Stanza

In this stanza, Espada tells readers that the Spanish "christened" the hummingbird "colibrí." The word "christened" is significant for its allusion to the Christian practice of baptism. Espada suggests that christening something that is not yours is also an act of appropriation. In this case, the Spanish are appropriating the Indians' land as well as their culture by naming the things of their world. He compares the hummingbird's frantic darting to the racing of the Taino's hearts when they first heard the sound of guns, underscoring the fear the bird and the Indians share. "Hacienda" is Spanish for a large estate, or the main building in such an estate. The bird, and figuratively the Taino, are caught inside the walls of the hacienda.

Third Stanza

In this stanza, Espada extends the comparison between the bird and the Taino, showing how the bird, like the native Taino, becomes paralyzed in the clutches of the Spanish. However, the hand also serves the function of liberator as well as captor, as it can both free and imprison the bird. The image of the hand also echoes the image in the collection's title, as do the carved circles at the end of the first stanza.

Espada describes the hummingbird's native habitat as "a paradise of sky, / a nightfall of singing frogs." The frogs are *coquí*, a local species that lives in trees and is found almost nowhere else in the world.

Fourth Stanza

These two lines provide the punch□some might say the punchline□for the poem. The wish that history might be like hands refers to the preceding image of the hand freeing the bird and, by extension, the Taino, from its, and their, imprisonment. The speaker desires that history could also free people. The tone here is melancholic, as the speaker realizes that history is not like hands.

Espada is outspoken in his desire for Puerto Rican independence. He considers that the United States, like Spain before it, is an occupying force and needs to leave so that the native people can rule themselves.

Themes

Language

One of the primary ways that colonizing powers subjugate a people is through language. The colonizer's act of naming and renaming the world of the colonized forces the less powerful to see themselves through the eyes of the occupiers, rather than through their own eyes. Espada foregrounds the diabolical nature of this practice by listing it along with guns as the primary weapon the Spanish used on the native Borinquens.

Espada provides two examples of renaming, "colibrí" and "Taino." The Spaniards called the native Arawak Taino, and they dubbed the hummingbird *colibrí*. The poem itself extends the metaphor comparing the former to the latter. Ironically, although the final image of the poem is one of liberation, there is no escaping from the circle of the oppressor's language, as it becomes part of the fabric of the way that the oppressed view and experience life. The poem's final image suggests that there can be no real liberation from the Europeans' linguistic colonialism.

History

History has as much, if not more, to do with the present than it does the past, as those who write it do so out of the demands of the present. The rush in the last few decades to rewrite American history taking into account the viewpoints of Native Americans and previously omitted peoples attests to this. Espada's poem can be seen as an attempt to provide another view of Puerto Rico's past by describing its "discovery" and occupation as acts of aggression. The last two lines of the poem□"If only history / were like your hands"□are both a wish and a lament, as they underscore the difficulty of undoing popular thinking about Puerto Rico and righting the injustices of the past.

Nature

Poets often romanticize nature by describing it in Edenic terms, as if it were a place of salvation and innocence. Espada draws on this tradition in "Colibrí" by linking the Taino to the natural world and the Spanish to a fallen world that attempts to dominate nature rather than live in harmony with it. Espada describes the Taino as living off the "plátanos in the trees," and he figuratively links the Taino with the hummingbird, an animal known for its beauty and vulnerability. Both are captives. When the bird is freed, it is released into "a paradise of sky / a nightfall of singing frogs." This line suggests the Taino also need to be freed into such a paradise. There are no predators in Espada's nature, no threats, except for the Spanish interlopers.

Colonialism

At various points in the history of civilization, countries have sought to occupy and annex other countries, often destroying the culture and irrevocably changing the history of those countries. In "Colibrí," Espada shows the effect of Spanish colonization on the Taino. The Spaniards change the Taino way of life, striking fear into them with their "iron and words." By comparing the Taino with the hummingbird, who "darts and bangs / between . . . white walls," Espada emphasizes how the Taino are imprisoned as well, literally and figuratively. Espada underlines the sheer brutality of colonial power with the image of the colibrí's "pure stillness" in the predator's hands.

Style

Metaphor and Simile

Metaphors underscore the similarities between two dissimilar things or ideas. Extended metaphors draw out that comparison. In "Colibrí," Espada develops an extended metaphor by comparing the Taino to the hummingbird. The tenor, or subject, of the comparison is the hummingbird, and the vehicle, or the metaphorical term itself, is the Taino. The third stanza is an example of an implicit metaphor, which is one in which the tenor is not specified but implied. The implied tenor here is the Taino.

In similes, comparison between two different things or ideas is made through the use of the word "like" or "as." Espada begins the poem with a simile when he writes, "the lizards scatter / like a fleet of green canoes / before the invader." This comparison draws attention to the fear of the lizards and the people in the canoes, and to the way in which both physically respond to that fear.

Imagery

"Colibrí" effectively portrays a picture of Taino oppression through its use of concrete imagery. Such imagery describes the world through the five senses. Espada's imagery is primarily visual, although he also includes aural (auditory) and kinesthetic (touch) imagery as well. Examples of visual imagery include the phrases, "fleet of green canoes," "multiple green fingers," and "rock carvings / of eyes and mouths." An example of an aural image is the phrase "hearing / the bellowing god of gunpowder." An example of a kinesthetic image, or one related to body movement or feeling, can be found in the first lines of the third stanza, when the colibrí is "seized in the paralysis / of the prey."

Historical Context

Espada's poem attempts to capture the fear and oppression felt by the Borinquens since the unwelcome arrival of outsiders. About fifty thousand Indians inhabited the island of Boriquen (which means "the great land of the valiant and noble Lord") when Christopher Columbus landed there in 1493. A peaceful people, the Taino were primarily farmers and fishermen living in a well-organized communal society. Columbus named the island "San Juan Bautista," for St. John the Baptist, and the town in which they landed "Puerto Rico" (rich port) because of its wealth of natural resources. The names were later switched when the King of Spain gave Columbus's lieutenant Juan Ponce de Leon a charter to settle the island in 1508. Spanish Conquistadors battled the native Indians, and those not killed were enslaved.

Continuing atrocities by the Spaniards and a smallpox epidemic almost wiped out the entire Taino population in the following decades. The womanless colonizers bred with the surviving Taino women, and, in the 1800s, the European population increased dramatically when Spain awarded land grants to immigrants seeking to settle on the island.

During this time, Puerto Rico's economy changed as sugar and coffee plantations replaced small farms. Puerto Rico became part of the United States after the Spanish-American War (1898- 1902), and in 1917, Puerto Ricans were given U.S. citizenship. Congress refused to grant either statehood or independence to the island but in 1952 gave it "commonwealth" status, meaning that Puerto Ricans have a large degree of local control over government, but the United States retains control over immigration, customs, and defense, and residents do not pay federal income taxes or vote in presidential elections.

By setting the poem in Jayuya, a historical center of Taino civilization, Espada draws on that city's recent revolutionary past. In 1950 Nationalist Party freedom fighters battled the U.S.-trained colonial police and national guard in an attempt to free the island from U.S. control. After learning of government plans to abolish his pro-independence organization, Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos, the party's leader, argued that Puerto Ricans had the right to use whatever means necessary to rid the island of foreign domination. Led by Blanca Canales, a group of party members captured the Jayuya police station and declared the independent Republic of Puerto Rico. Nationalists clashed with government forces in other municipalities as well, including Utuado, Ponce, Mayaguez, Arecibo, Naranjito, Ciales, and Penuelas. Police called in the national guard to crush the uprising, and the government imposed martial law.

In retaking Jayuya, warplane bombs destroyed more than 50 percent of the city, including numerous homes. After U.S. President Harry Truman represented the events in Puerto Rico as a local conflict, nationalists Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola attempted to assassinate him in Washington, D.C. However, D.C. police and Truman's bodyguards killed Torresola in a shoot-out and critically wounded Collazo.

The fight for Puerto Rican independence continues today. Espada, who is baffled by the failure of Puerto Rican voters to pass a resolution proclaiming independence, writes in an essay for the *Progressive* that the United States has "greedily exploited the labor and natural resources of the island; established a menacing, strategic military presence; forced English on the public schools and the court system; and repressed the independence movement." Arguing that the island is a colony of the United States, Espada claims that Puerto Rico's commonwealth status "is part of a colonial strategy, an illusory liberalization which has actually perpetuated U.S. control." A more recent clash between nationalists and the United States is over the U.S. Navy's use of the uninhabited Puerto Rican island of Vieques for bombing practice. The moratorium on bombing is set to expire in 2003.

Critical Overview

The bilingual collection in which "Colibrí" appears, *Rebellion Is the Circle of a Lover's Hands*, was awarded the 1989 PEN/Revson Award and garnered a good deal of praise from reviewers. Writing for *Publishers Weekly*, Penny Kaganoff notes, "All the poems are fine, but Espada is at his best in his pieces about the plight of migrant workers and refugees from Central America." Sam Cornish, in a review for *Ploughshares*, calls Espada "talented and promising" and writes, "Espada's work has integrity mingled with an ironic and sometimes bitter well-articulated sense of alienation by class and language." Roger Gilbert underscores Espada's political convictions as well. In the *Partisan Review*, Gilbert writes that Espada's poems are "continually informed by anger at social and economic injustices. This anger gives the book considerable moral urgency."

Arguing that Espada's poems "deserve an audience," Alan Gilbert praises Espada's style in the *Boston Review*, writing that "the individuality of Espada's voice is one to which any attentive reader can respond." Leslie Ullman underscores Espada's gift for narrative in her review for the *Kenyon Review*. Ullman writes, "The poems in this collection tell their stories and flesh out their characters deftly, without shrillness or rhetoric, and vividly enough to invite the reader into a shared sense of loss." Critic John Bradley lauds the collection in the *Bloomsbury Review* for "the expansive humanity of Espada's vision."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition. In this essay, Semansky considers Espada's poem as a political poem.

Espada is a political poet at a time when the relevance of both politics and poetry has become significantly challenged in the American popular imagination. He is largely successful not because his politics agree with the poetry-reading public, but because they enliven the art. Espada does not use poetry as a vehicle for his politics; rather, he fuses the two to create work that various readers can appreciate, whether they agree with his political positions or not. "Colibrí" is an example of such a fusion.

Espada titles the poem with the name Spanish colonizers gave to the hummingbirds they found on the island of Borinquen. Doing so highlights the role of language in the poem, asking readers to keep in mind the significance of the term throughout the poem. Whereas less-skilled poets interested in merely "expressing" themselves might simply title the poem "Evil Spanish Conquistadors" and rant about the miscarriage of justice suffered by the native Borinquens, Espada creates a portrait of a tropical paradise. This shows readers the world that Borinquens lost and creates sympathy for the Indians. By showing instead of telling readers what the Spaniards did, Espada avoids the pitfall of appearing to preach, always a danger in poems with explicitly political subject matter.

Noting that much political verse has a "bad name," critic Ray Olson nonetheless praises Espada's poetry, writing in *Booklist* that it is "unsentimental, realistic work that almost never sounds a contestable note." Espada's realism is another way in which the poet establishes credibility for his politics. By realism, Olson means the way in which Espada uses concrete imagery to describe relatively ordinary events such as lizards scattering and hummingbirds darting. These are perfectly plausible descriptions that readers can see and understand; they are not romantic flights of fancy requiring readers to suspend their disbelief. Black activist and poet Amiri Baraka writes in the foreword to *Rebellion Is the Circle of a Lover's Hand*: "Martín Espada's work does not necessitate fantasy as its voice, it illuminates reality. Its truth . . . will make new volumes of Espada's still young work as seriously awaited as the next day." Espada does, however, occasionally lapse into the sentimental, as in his Edenic depictions of the natural world into which the hummingbird is released. Even these lapses, however, have significance for the reader aware of Puerto Rico's rich tropical environment. When reading that the hummingbird is released into "a paradise of sky / a nightfall of singing frogs," such readers would visualize the coquí tree frog, that is ubiquitous on the island, and hear its melodious call.

Espada's success in crafting political poems has as much to do with what he leaves out as what he includes. In his more successful poems such as "Colibrí," Espada puts history rather than himself at the center of the poem and, as Espada critic John R. Keene notes in *MELUS*, "History is the mirror that reflects the interplay of political forces." Too often political poetry overdoses on "I-ness," the compulsion by poets to put their own egos at the center of the universe, to personalize subjects only to trivialize them. By writing about historical subjects that are still relevant today, Espada mines the

distance between past and present to allow readers to recognize themselves in history's mirror.

Espada also challenges readers to do their own research, rather than giving them all of the information of an event up front. For readers, this adds to their sense of discovery, and, hence, appreciation of the poem. For example, few readers unfamiliar with Puerto Rico or the independence movement there would grasp the significance of setting the poem in Jayuya, a nationalist stronghold and center for a nationalist uprising in 1950. Similarly, few readers would know that "the rock carvings / of eyes and mouths in perfect circles of amazement" refer to Taino petroglyphs and that these petroglyphs comprise Taino written language. The beauty of this poem is that although it still "works" without the reader knowing these allusions, the poem becomes richer with such knowledge. For example, knowing the significance of the carvings adds irony to the image of the "eyes and mouths / in perfect circles of amazement," for it suggests that the Taino had a kind of foreknowledge of their fate. Being a form of writing, the petroglyphs also stand in stark contrast to the speech of the Spaniards, who literally subjugate the natives through their power to name. The mute "amazement" of the carvings echo and underscore the Indians' powerlessness.

The word Taino is derived from one of the initial encounters between the Spaniards and the Indians. When the Spaniards asked, "Who are you?" the Indians simply answered "Taino," which in their language means "good and noble people." This was to distinguish themselves from some of the more hostile tribes, such as the Caribs. That the colonizers would call the Indians "Taino" from then on is ironic, as it contrasts with the Spaniards' brutal and ignoble behavior towards the natives. The Jatibonicu Taino of Puerto Rico are descended from the original twenty-four tribal bands that settled in Puerto Rico (whose ancestors are the Central American Indians and the Arawak Indians of South America), and the colibrí is the sacred totem of the Jatibonicu Taino. The very existence of the Tainos was not proven until the middle of the twentieth century, when scientists and historians began tracing their origins through pottery made only by the Taino. More recently, anthropologists and linguists have been drawn to the Taino language. David Wahayona Campos links the Taino language to the "Arawakan stock stemming from South America," and writes:

> Contrary to what has been thought and taught by
> some, the Taino language was not completely extinguished.
> Portions were absorbed over time into the
> Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Spanish spoken in
> Boriken retains over 600 Taino words. . . . Among
> words of indigenous origin are objects, geographical
> names, personal names as well as flora and fauna. . . .
> Throughout all the islands, a majority of native trees,
> fruits and rivers also retain their Taino names.

By making one of the subjects of his poem Eurolinguistic colonialism, Espada foregrounds the very processes of making history. The fact that the Spaniards colonized the Borinquens, naming them and their world, gives them the "right" to write history.

This, along with the mixing of Taino culture and blood over the last five hundred years with the Spanish, African, and French, has made it difficult for people of Taino descent to explore their roots or assert their identity. The very fact that many use the word Taino to identify themselves is proof of colonialism's continuing power and reach. The waning of colonial powers over the last century, however, coupled with the rise of the human rights movement have created a space for just such an exploration of their history. As a result, numerous new histories written from the point of view of subjugated peoples have been published. Espada alludes to this in the last two lines of the poem when he writes, "If only history / were like your hands." As well as echoing the image of the collection's title, this wish is also a statement of possibility, for history is both made through the hard work of people often unacknowledged and written with one's hands.

In supporting Puerto Rican independence, Espada is swimming against the tide of history. The Nationalist Party, the leading voice for independence, has been linked to violence, and nationalists have been engaged in a number of violent acts, including the attempted assassination of President Truman in 1950 and the shooting of five members of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1954. In 1967, Puerto Rico voted to remain a commonwealth, and, in 1993, Governor Pedro Rosselló of the New Progressive party held a plebiscite in which 48 percent of the voters elected to petition the U.S. Congress to retain the commonwealth with enhanced status, 46 percent chose statehood, and just 4 percent chose independence.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Colibrí," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

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 suggests that the horrors of virtual genocide and destruction of a culture are made all the more poignant by the soft, beautiful imagery and low-key voice that Espada uses to describe them.

Quite often, poets who want to use their creative skills and poetic inspirations to make social or political statements do so in harsh, "loud" language that seems to shout at the reader in anger and protest. Sometimes the words are meant to shock, whether by means of the brutal or explicit subjects they describe or by being the taboo four-letter kind, and the desired results are to rile the reader into feeling what the poet feels, believing what the poet believes. Sometimes these kinds of poems work. Consider, for instance, Allen Ginsberg's muchheralded anthem of the Beat Movement, "Howl," which shocked, outraged, and protested its way into the annals of classic American literature. Since then, many other poets have taken up their pens and used them like axes, chopping through polite, safe protocols to produce works that arouse reactions, both positive and negative. For these writers, the poem is a soapbox□a good place to get vocal and draw a crowd. But one need not always shout to be heard. In "Colibrí," Martín Espada addresses one of the most controversial and maligned historical accounts ever recorded□Columbus's "discoveries" and the subsequent Spanish colonization of New World territories□and he does so with a quiet voice, subtle innuendos, and strikingly beautiful imagery. This kind of poem works too, often better than a loud one.

A bit of historical research and a good understanding of Puerto Rican culture are essential in realizing the full meaning of "Colibrí." While one can read the poem and pick up an accurate notion of its intent from the surface, a much richer appreciation of what Espada is really saying can be found in the work's not-so-visible depths. Why "Jayuya," for example? For hundreds of years this small, relatively unknown town in the center of Puerto Rico has maintained more ties to the original Taino culture than probably any other community on the island; therefore, it is only fitting that Espada chose it to represent what little is left of an entire way of life once the destructive forces of invading armies and colonizers roll through. Comparing the helpless native Taino people in canoes to scattering lizards as they tried to flee from Spanish soldiers is metaphorically brilliant as well as very telling of the fears the natives experienced at the hands of the invaders. A more subtle, but just as troubling, reference is in the lines, "The Spanish conquered with iron and with words: / 'Indio Taino.'" Because Columbus and his explorers mistakenly thought they had reached India when, in fact, they had landed in the Caribbean islands, they attached the word "Indio" to the actual name of the people they encountered. Right away, they gave the native people and their entire culture a new title□half Spanish, of course□whether they wanted it or not. In this way, the European invaders were able to overcome and defeat the original settlers not only "with iron" weapons but also with infiltrating words that signaled the crumbling of one culture beneath the rule of another. Proof of how well the disrespectful moniker stuck is evidenced still today in the common use of the terms "Indio Taino" or "Taino Indians,"

even by people who can trace ancestry back to the original Tainos. It is also true that many of those people are still offended and angered by the terms.

The gentleness of Espada's words reflects the gentleness of the Taino people (most historical writings make this claim), even when the imagery alludes to violence and defeat. He describes the island natives as "the people who took / life from the rain that rushed through the trees," implying a loving and reciprocal relationship with their tropical environment. But the life-giving rain is then compared to "evaporating arrows," suggesting the ineffectiveness of such crude weaponry when confronted with the firearms and cannons of the strangers from Europe. And it was not only the hapless arrows that evaporated at the hands of the Spanish, but the entire Taino culture as well. Known for their artistic abilities with wood and rock carvings, the Tainos typically depicted human faces with wide circles for eyes and mouths. Here, the poet implies that the art reflected the shock and amazement over how swiftly and easily their lives had been forever altered by the unstoppable conquerors.

It is interesting that a poem which laments the atrocities of political history and the usurpation of a people's homeland by dogged explorers is titled for such a tiny, vulnerable creature as the hummingbird. Notice that Espada makes it clear that the animal suffered the same abuse of its name as did the Tainos themselves. The line, "So the hummingbird was christened 'colibrí'" really says, "Here is another example of the Spanish language infiltrating the original Taino." Even so, the little colibrí is a perfect symbol of the people who were just as defenseless against their invaders as a hummingbird would be against nearly any other being, animal or human (if it could be caught, of course). The poem's movement from the distant past to the present is smooth and not intrusive, but it very poignantly ties today's grievous memories to the history that created them. The image of the small bird frantically trying to escape from a place where it does not belong□someone's house, in this case□is made stronger by Espada's reference to its "racing Taino heart." The symbolic link between the colibrí of the present and the Taino people of long ago is one of vulnerability and fear, brought on by the "bellowing god of gunpowder." For the colibrí, this is just a striking metaphor; for the Tainos, it is all too literal.

Using the hummingbird as a symbol for the original inhabitants of Jayuya may be an obvious metaphorical connection in this poem, but there is a deeper meaning as well. The hummingbird was sacred to the Taino people because it is a pollinator□ that is, a life giver, something very important in many native cultures. It was not, then, just its small size and seeming helplessness that motivated Espada to use it as the central metaphor but also the irony in knowing its natural inclination to create life, not take it away. It is not necessary to grasp this subtle information in order to *get* the idea in "Colibrí," but its presence is a good example of how a quiet little poem can carry a much more profound and complex message than its conspicuous meaning may reveal. Perhaps other examples are the use of the word "hacienda"□ yet another Spanish term□and the mention of the bird's being caught "between the white walls." The latter is conceivably a metaphor for the white Europeans who essentially trapped the worlds they invaded within the confines of their own.

The last full stanza of "Colibrí" contains the poem's softest, most beautiful imagery. And it is not a contradiction to say the descriptions are also the strongest and most provocative. Just as the fraught little hummingbird suddenly "becomes pure stillness," the poem, too, seems to let its social protests and historical accounting quickly fall silent, giving way to the bare artistry of *showing* the reader a scene rather than just telling about it. The simple and thoughtful gesture of the "you" in the poem□who it actually is does not matter□cupping the bird, paralyzed with fear, in gentle hands and setting it free through a window is remarkably vivid and satisfying. One can easily *see* that happening, can readily picture the tiny, stock-still animal, probably hidden within the human hands, suddenly taking flight "into a paradise of sky, / a nightfall of singing frogs." This peaceful, serene moment is hauntingly at odds with the chilling and sorrowful events it symbolizes. But, that is the power of a quiet poem.

Any reader not yet convinced of the punch that "Colibrí" unloads must surely be tempted by the raw understatement of the poem's final line. This is where everything comes together: the scattering lizards, the brutal conquering of the Taino people by the Spanish, the hummingbird's frenzied attempts to escape and its ultimate stillness, the protective hands that set it free. Given all these extraordinary descriptions and the tumultuous history they reference, it is almost anticlimactic to end the poem with such a doleful sentiment as, "If only history / were like your hands." It sounds terribly pathetic, if not whining and weak. Yet, just the opposite is true. This final line implies a final lamentation, one based solely on an impossible condition. "If only" really means *this is not the way it is*, and pointing that out in such a soft, subdued tone is both startling and disturbing. Considering what the sentence means□that the human race has chosen to kill its prey rather than to free it□and the vital importance of its message, one may expect it to be shouted from that proverbial soapbox mentioned earlier. At the very least, should it not cry out in despair? No, not if the intent is to leave the reader uneasy and troubled by its eerie subtlety. As is often the case, presenting something unexpected riles more feelings than simply meeting readers' presumptions. Espada manages to do that throughout "Colibrí" and, in particular, with the last line. His quiet voice is, indeed, despairing, and he need not raise it to be heard.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Colibrí," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Compare and contrast the use of bird imagery in Espada's poem with the bird imagery in Richard Wilbur's poem "The Writer." Discuss the ways in which Wilbur's poem is political, and Espada's poem is personal.

Research the history of the Spanish occupation of Borinquen beginning in 1493 and construct a chart listing the political "development" of the island. Present your findings to your class.

Get into groups and develop a dictionary of Taino words that have made it into the English or Spanish language. Make copies and distribute them to your class.

Research the history of Christopher Columbus's trips to the "new world" and make a chart of popular myths related to his discovery of America. Next to that list, make another one explaining the historical facts relating to the events.

Research the history of the Taino. How did they get to Borinquen and when? Present your findings to your class.

Research the history of independence movements in Latin America. Write a short essay on how the Puerto Rican independence movement compares to those of several other countries.

Christopher Columbus wrote in his journal that Tainos had beautiful tall slender bodies and that the Taino tongue was "gentle, the sweetest in the world, always with a laugh." From a Borinquen's point of view, write diary entries for the first week during which they encountered the Spanish. Take turns reading these out loud to your class.

Compare and Contrast

1500s: Juan Ponce de Leon is given a charter by the king of Spain to colonize Borinquen (Puerto Rico).

Today: Puerto Rico is a commonwealth of the United States, although various groups lobby both for statehood and independence.

1500s: More than fifty thousand Taino Indians live on the island of Borinquen.

Today: Puerto Rico's population is 3.8 million. Europeans, Indians, and Africans have interbred to create a racially mixed people.

1500s: The Spanish explore the world, colonizing numerous lands including what are now Mexico and Peru.

Today: Spain, its empire long dissolved, is now a member of both the European Community and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

What Do I Read Next?

Imagine the Angels of Bread (1996) is Espada's sixth book of poems and, like his previous five, has been widely praised by critics. Reviewing the collection for the *Progressive*, Matthew Rothschild notes that Espada "continues to serve up his trademark vignettes of the indignities that working-class and immigrant Americans suffer every day."

Puerto Rico Past and Present (1998), by Ronald Fernandez, Serafin Mendez, and Gail Cueto, is an encyclopedia that provides a useful and broad overview of more than five hundred years of Puerto Rican history and culture.

In 1995, Ballantine Books published *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings An Anthology*, edited by Roberto Santiago. This anthology contains more than fifty selections of poetry, fiction, plays, essays, monologues, screenplays, and speeches from some of the most powerful voices in Puerto Rican literature. Poems by Espada are included.

In 1994, Espada edited *Poetry Like Bread: Poets of the Political Imagination*, published by Curbstone Press. The anthology collects poems by activist writers, such as El Salvador's Roque Dalton, Nicaragua's Tomas Borge, and Puerto Rico's Clemente Soto Velez.

Further Study

Espada, Martín, *Zapata's Disciple*, South End Press, 1998.

This collection of essays provides detailed information on Espada's personal life and politics, including essays on topics such as the English Only movement, and Puerto Rican independence.

Labrucherie, Roger A., *Puerto Rico, Borinquen Querida*, Imagenes Press, 2001.

This book consists of a long photographic essay about Puerto Rico. With photographs, paintings, maps, and text, it details Puerto Rico's history, geography, scenery, and culture.

Rouse, Irving, *The Tainos: Rise & Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus*, Yale University Press, 1993.

This engaging book tells the story of the Taino people from their ancestral days in South America through their migration to the northern Caribbean islands to their rapid decline at the hands of European colonizers.

Santana, Maria Cristina, *Puerto Rican Newspaper Coverage of the Puerto Rican Independence Party: A Content Analysis of Three Elections*, Garland Publishers, 2000.

This study explores the struggle of the Puerto Rican Independence Party for serious press coverage in the last three gubernatorial elections. Espada is an ardent supporter of the Puerto Rican independence movement.

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Keene, John R., Review of *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators*, in *MELUS*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Spring 1996, pp. 133-36.

Olson, Ray, Review of *A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 96, No. 12, February 15, 2000, p. 1074.

Rothschild, Matthew, Review of *Imagine the Angels of Bread*, in *Progressive*, Vol. 61, No. 1, January 1997, p. 39.

Ullman, Leslie, Review of *Rebellion Is the Circle of a Lover's Hands*, in *Kenyon Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Summer 1992, p. 174-88.

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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