Duration Study Guide

Duration by Octavio Paz

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Introduction

Octavio Paz's poem "Duration" was originally published in his 1962 collection *Salamandra (1958- 1961)* , later published in English as *Salamander* . It provides an excellent example of one of the twentieth century's most important poets working at his prime. In this poem, Paz, the 1990 winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, shows his interests in writing poetry outside of the poetic tradition, in exploring new methods of using language on the page. The images that he uses here do not follow one another gracefully, but they do add up to a new way of looking at reality. By breaking reality into fragments and then putting them back together in careful arrangements, "Duration" is able to raise questions about the ways that the fragments of experience relate to one another.

Paz was an important world literary figure from the 1950s until his death in 1998 and is considered by many to be the most important and influential writer that Mexico has ever produced. Much of his most notable experimental poetry was produced while he worked for Mexico's diplomatic corps in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition to poetry, he is known almost equally well as a literary theorist, with numerous books of essays about the nature of art and the possibilities of language.

Today, "Duration" can be found in both English and Spanish in *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz, 1957-1987* , published by New Directions.

Author Biography

Octavio Paz was born in Mexico City in 1914. His grandfather was a writer, one of the first Mexican writers to write a novel about Indians. His father was active in politics, an aide to Emiliano Zapata, a populist land reformer who led a revolution against the government; a few years of Paz's childhood were spent in Los Angeles, to which his father was forced to flee after Zapata was killed in 1919. When the family returned to Mexico City, Paz, in his teens, began publishing poetry and short stories. He enrolled in law school but, once there, he became politically active. In the late 1930s, he went to Spain to attend a conference of leftist Latin American writers. While there, he enlisted to help in the Spanish Civil War.

After the war ended, Paz spent time in America on a Guggenheim grant, traveling as a journalist between New York and California, trying to popularize the plight of the Spanish people under the dictator Francisco Franco. His political work led him into the Mexican diplomatic service. In 1946, he was sent to France as a diplomat. Over the following twenty years, he also worked in embassies in Japan and India. Government work allowed Paz time for writing, and his literary output during this time was prodigious: in addition to poetry, he also produced volumes of essays, travel work, and other forms of writing that cannot be easily categorized. Much of his work has focused on identifying the national characteristics of his native Mexico. He founded and edited numerous literary reviews over the course of more than fifty years in literature. Paz quit the diplomatic corps in 1968, objecting to the way the Mexican government dealt with student demonstrations□firing into crowds and torturing those arrested□in Tlatelolco, a section of Mexico City. He remained active in politics and lent his support to left-wing organizations. His poetry was recognized with almost every major international award available, including the Jerusalem Prize, the Grand Aigle d'Or of France, and the Tocqueville Prize. In 1990, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, after having been nominated several times. Paz died of cancer in Mexico City in 1998 at the age of eighty-four.

Poem Text

I

Sky black
Yellow earth
The rooster tears the night apart
The water wakes and asks what time it is
The wind wakes and asks for you
A white horse goes by

II

As the forest in its bed of leaves
you sleep in your bed of rain
you sing in your bed of wind
you kiss in your bed of sparks

III

Multiple vehement odor
many-handed body
On an invisible stem a single
whiteness

IV

Speak listen answer me
what the thunderclap
says, the woods
understand

V

I enter by your eyes
you come forth by my mouth
You sleep in my blood
I waken in your head

VI

I will speak to you in stone-language
(answer with a green syllable)
I will speak to you in snow-language

(answer with a fan of bees)
I will speak to you in water-language
(answer with a canoe of lightning)
I will speak to you in blood-language
30 (answer with a tower of birds)

Plot Summary

I

The epigraph that starts this poem is from the *I Ching* , an important text of ancient Chinese Confucianism. The *I Ching* , also referred to as "The Book of Changes," expresses the Taoist philosophy of yin and yang, the balance of opposites in all things. This is shown in the first two lines of "Duration," which juxtapose the darkness of the sky against the lightness of the earth.

In addition to a balance between things, line 3 presents a balance between objects and actions, as the crowing of a rooster, generally recognized as a sign that dawn is coming, is presented as a violent, tearing motion that can affect the night, dividing it into parts.

The poem's first section contains two lines, 4 and 5, that have parallel wording. In each case, Paz urges readers to rethink the reality of what is discussed. Of course, water and wind do not wake at any one point: they go on with a steady motion day and night. The poem gives them human characteristics, anthropomorphizing them. More specifically, it gives them the characteristics of the speaker of the poem by having the second one ask about a person to whom the poem's speaker would be talking. The white horse at the end of the stanza is not, significantly, counterbalanced with another parallel image, implying that it is a symbol of freedom that is outside of the yin/yang perspective.

II

The point of this stanza is to draw a comparison between the "you" being addressed in the poem and the elements of nature. It starts with a personification of nature, portraying the forest's quiet stillness as "sleep" and the leaves that lie on the ground in the forest as a "bed." After the first line, each subsequent line focuses on the human being surrounded by nature, and with each line the imagery becomes more imaginative. Imagining rain as a bed for a sleeping person is reasonable, because a person could sleep in rain or on top of the puddles it leaves. The "bed of wind" mentioned in the third line is less likely, however, as is the idea of singing in a bed. Mentioning wind draws a connection from this stanza back to the epigraph from the *I Ching* . The last line's reference to kissing in a bed of sparks is a sexual reference, implying the electricity released in passion. Once more, there is an unstated contrast between the active verbs that Paz uses and the stillness that is associated with sleeping in a bed.

III

Having alluded to sexuality in the previous stanza, here the poem uses imagery that is more openly erotic. Odor is a very sensual thing in poetry, if only because it is the sense that is least often represented by writers and therefore has a stronger impact on readers. The fact that the odor mentioned in the first line is both "multiple" and

"vehement" gives it a stronger impact than it would have if it were restrained. The second line of this section connects hands to bodies, showing how all people are connected to each other on the "invisible stem" of the third line. This section ends with the same whiteness that ended the first section, a reminder to readers of the freedom of the image of the white horse. After portraying all of mankind as being connected and having made the connection between humanity and nature in the previous stanza, the poem reminds readers of things that exist outside of the closed circuit.

IV

The nature of the fourth section is communication. The words in the first lines are the ones most often used to discuss conversation: "speak," "listen," and "answer." They are not, however, presented in a way that is meant to resemble conversation. They are jumbled together without any punctuation in a way that does not allow for any give-and-take between them, as if the actions of speaking and listening and answering could happen all at once. Though the poem's title, "Duration," refers to an extended period of time, this line contrasts that by forcing three distinct acts together as if no time passes between them.

The rest of this section shows another case of personifying nature. While the first line makes human communication a supernatural thing that occurs outside of the flow of time, the last three lines present nature communicating as humans do. The thunder is another reference to the poem's epigraph, showing that the things of the world endure. The fact that it speaks here, and the woods understand, refers to the poem's very first lines, about the relationship of the sky and the earth. The "understanding" in the poem's eighteenth line shows Earth and sky□in essence, everything there is□ interacting with each other and not just existing side by side.

V

The poem, not having mentioned the "you" explicitly in several stanzas (and only having implied that character in the commands at the start of section IV), returns to an examination of human relations in section V. Here, human interaction is shown to be extremely intimate: the speaker of the poem is inside of the other person. They are linked by sight and by mouth.

The third line of this section, "you sleep in my blood," takes this relationship beyond the smaller concerns of two people and, instead, hints at genetic memory passed down through generations. In the style of the rest of the poem, its exact opposite occurs in the very next line: "You" is replaced by "I"; "sleep" is replaced by "waken"; and "blood" is replaced by "head." The contrast is drawn here between the unconscious knowledge, carried in sleep and in blood, and conscious knowledge that occurs in the mind while awake.

VI

The poem's final section summarizes the dualities that have been established earlier, showing the contrasts between language and nature, sense and nonsense, the "I" and the "you." Of the four types of language that are referred to here□stone, snow, water, and blood□it is the last one that is a human property. Placing it at the end of the list like this brings it into the group, reminding readers that blood is as much a natural element as the other three.

The parenthetical responses in the evennumbered lines of this stanza represent the poem's most challenging mysteries. There is no symbolic significance to a green syllable, a fan of bees, a canoe of lightning, or a tower of birds. They are mentioned as appropriate responses to language precisely because they lack meaning, and dialog is therefore rendered impossible. This might seem to deal language a crippling blow, but, as it is presented in this poem, language is elevated, not diminished. Talk and answer are not connected sensibly, but they do exist together, and like yin and yang, like thunder and wind, they have a deep, natural relationship that goes beyond human comprehension.

Themes

Nature

The epigraph of "Duration," taken from the *I Ching* , shows the emphasis on nature that is to follow. The significance of thunder and wind, of all things, is not made clear, but the fact that they are here together tells readers that Paz intends to explore what they have to do with one another. Throughout the poem, natural elements, especially those related to weather, are used to raise questions about human relationships by showing readers parallels to human interaction. Rain, wind, thunder, and snow are all larger-than-life events that occur in the sky, but here they speak to the earth, and to humanity.

The poem not only uses nature to represent human action; it also uses it to show human inaction as well. Forests are used to stand for human passivity, receiving the messages from the skies and processing them. In section II the forest is directly compared to a person who is sleeping (the first line mentions "the forest in its bed," and the following three discuss "you in your bed"); in section IV, the woods are said to "understand" what the thunder has to say. Being stationary, the trees represent the "yellow earth" that is mentioned in the second line, positioned in contrast with the activity of the black, starless sky.

Synchronicity

Synchronicity is a term coined by the Swedish psychologist Carl Jung. It refers to the explanation that certain events that happen simultaneously are assumed to share some meaningful relationship, similar to cause and effect but less clearly ruled. In "Duration," Paz points out events that happen near each other in time, and the simple fact that he focuses readers' attention on them makes them seem to follow some sense of order that goes beyond the common scientific explanations for them. The crowing of the rooster is represented as more than a reaction to dawn; it is presented as a cause of dawn. The similarity between a dormant forest and a sleeping person is presented as if the two have a connection that is deeper than simple resemblance.

Even the detached call-and-response of the last stanza has, for instance, a "canoe of lightning" that is said to be an answer to "water-language." These questions and answers seem to have a sort of indefinable synchronicity because the poet has decided to present these unrelated ideas together. To some extent, all symbolic poetry can be thought to deal in synchronicity because it presents relationships that the logical mind cannot explain but that the unconscious recognizes. This poem, though, brings this feeling out to the surface, making readers accept odd similarities as more than coincidence.

Style

Language

Language is a commonly understood system of symbols that people use to communicate ideas. Although it is usually used to describe the exchange of words, the word "language" is also often used for nonverbal actions, such as "body language" or "the language of film." The fact that "Duration" is concerned with language becomes clear in the very first section, when Paz has elements of nature, wind and water, asking questions. The questions that they ask are ones that a human would be concerned with, indicating that nature not only has the human ability to communicate but that human interests come with communication.

The similarity between human language and interactions in nature is picked up again in the fourth section of the poem, where thunder speaks and the woods understand. In one sense, this is true, because the things of nature respond to one another: the animals in the forest might be riled by a thunderclap, for instance, and cause a commotion. Still, this kind of relationship between an event and its result is seldom described as "speaking" and "understanding." Paz is using the words loosely, drawing a symbolic comparison between causality in nature and language in humans: still, it is a comparison that is rooted in reality. The interaction between the thunderclap and the woods has much in common with speaking and responding. That same section, IV, gives little serious consideration to human verbal interaction. By running the words "speak listen answer me" together without punctuation, the poem shows the weaknesses of human language, which can often be recited without any concern about how the listener will respond to what is said.

By the final section, language has merged with nature. Language has no more meaning than the things assumed to be incapable of meaning. Stone, snow, water, and blood are all presented as things that have their own language, a language that the poem's speaker promises to speak. Syllables are described as the color green, as if they were tangible things that could hold colors. Natural objects, such as bees, birds, and lightning, are considered to be acceptable answers. Paz has broken language down to its elements, showing how the human activity alone does not capture the interactive nature of dialog.

Cubism

Critics have pointed out that Paz's poetry was influenced by French cubism in painting. Cubism was a movement that began in 1908 in Paris. Its most famed practitioner was the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso. The point of this style of art was to capture the three-dimensional essence of an object and not necessarily to show how it looked from one fixed perspective. Therefore, a cubist artwork might show a person with both eyes on one side of his or her head or with limbs jutting out from the body in angles that do not

seem natural. Like the *I Ching* , which is based around a series of sixty-four hexagrams, cubist art captures reality in geometric patterns.

"Duration" shows a verbal equivalent of the cubist's visual style. Rather than trying to present the world as it appears, Paz presents a sense of reality that corresponds with how the world feels, which it makes up from specific objects from reality. The nonlinear method of connecting ideas can be frustrating for readers, who do not know exactly why the poem jumps from one idea to another or even what certain images (such as the "manyhanded body") are supposed to be. But the important thing for a poem like this is to leave readers with a sense of reality, hopefully one that is more real than they can get from their own experiences.

Structure

This poem is written in six distinct sections, with no structural connection between them. Each section takes a format of its own, from the brief introductory lines that start section I, to the repetition of section II, to the incomplete clause of section III, to the statement and parenthetical response pattern of section VI. Any one of these sections could stand as its own poem; together, however, they create a cumulative effect. Considering the similarities and the differences between the sections leads readers to one overall idea, which is related to the mysterious thought expressed in the epigraph.

Historical Context

At the time that this poem was created, in 1962, Paz worked for the Mexican diplomatic corps. The country was relatively stable. Less than fifty years earlier, though, it had been through a violent civil war. The revolution, from 1911 to 1917, had removed a dictator who had held the country by military force since 1876. It had been led by Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, for whom Paz's father worked. With the overthrow of the government, Villa and Zapata, who went on to be remembered as folk heroes, and the government transformed into a one-party federal republic that followed socialist principles. After World War II came the Cold War, which pitted two superpowers against each other as they each tried to convert other countries to its economic system. Mexico's neighbor, the United States, tried to spread capitalism: Mexico's socialist political system made it more likely for Mexico to align itself politically with the Soviet Union, which supported the spread of communism. In the postwar years, countries across South and Central America underwent violent revolutions against the dictators who had controlled them.

Since many of these dictators had been supportive of U.S. industries, the revolutions were spurred with anticapitalist rhetoric, which raised fears in Washington that anti-industrial rebellions were the result of an international Communist conspiracy. During the Eisenhower administration in the 1950s, the Central Intelligence Agency was responsible for working behind the scenes in countries all over the Americas, training soldiers and providing them with arms; gathering intelligence against protestors; overthrowing the government of Guatamala in 1954; and in at least one case, that of openly Communist Cuba, arranging for the assassination of government leader Fidel Castro.

While other Latin American countries were involved in political upheaval, Mexico was at peace. One reason for this was that it had become a major player in the world oil market. In 1938, the government had appropriated oil companies and thrown out the international conglomerates that owned them, causing a boycott on Mexican oil and products by Europe and the United States. After World War II, though, things changed with the election of Miguel Almán Valdés, the country's first civilian president. He took a pro-business approach to helping the country's stagnant economy and worked to modernize Mexico with electricity and water for rural areas and improved transportation. International companies were welcomed back in, finding a business environment that was friendly to the rich, even while most of the population lived in poverty. The United States government also found Mexico to be cooperative in its opposition to Communism. The CIA was allowed free rein to investigate and persecute suspected Communist agitators who it feared might be able to stir up interest in a Communist uprising.

Mexico's "special relationship" with the United States lasted until the late 1960s, when, in an attempt to curtail drug traffic, President Richard Nixon closed the border between the two countries, dealing a devastating blow to the Mexican economy. This reversed the trend of cooperation that had started in the 1940s, and Mexico sought economic

independence from the United States. In the 1980s, Mexico aligned itself with rebels in several countries where the United States supported the standing governments, particularly Nicaragua and El Salvador. This strained Mexican-U.S. relations further. However, around the same time the United States came to rely on Mexico's support in its war against drugs. Because of the geographical closeness and the economic disparity between the two, both countries often find themselves allied, despite political differences.

Critical Overview

Octavio Paz's reputation as one of the greatest literary figures of Latin America in the twentieth century and certainly Mexico's most important writer at that time rests on both his extensive output of poetry□over thirty collections over the course of fifty years□and his essays, which almost equal the poetry in quantity, thoughtfulness, and influence. The two categories of writing compliment each other. As John C. Fein put it in an essay titled "Toward Octavo Paz: A Reading of his Major Poems, 1957-1976," "His success in diversified fields is heightened in the ways in which his essays and his poetry are complimentary: the core of his creativity is a concern for language in general and for the poetic process in particular." In other words, critics' positive reaction to Paz's poetry is brought to an even higher level by the fact that his poetry is based on sound principles enumerated in his nonfiction, particularly those regarding the use of language. *Salamandra (1958-1961)* , the 1962 volume that "Duration" was first printed in, is particularly often cited as an example of how Paz would work with ideas about language.

Because critical approval of Paz's work is universal, the only question that came up when he was awarded the Noble Prize for literature in 1990 was why it took so long. In his introduction to a volume about essays on the poet, Harold Bloom noted that giving him the prize was "one of the sounder choices," alluding to the unusual degree of approval from literary critics around the world. As *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature* summarized Paz's career, "There is Spanish American poetry after Octavio Paz: generations of poets who reject his legacy, and others that continue his line of experimentation. Nevertheless, the imprint that Paz has given to the tradition as a whole will be with us for years to come."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, Kelly examines the third stanza of Paz's poem as a noticeably strange part of a poem that is itself deliberately unusual.

Octavio Paz wrote poetry for over fifty years, and he published extensive essays and articles about the nature of art. The mysteries of most of his works have been addressed and usually accounted for in some way. Still, there are fragments and stray lines that just do not make sense. Part of this was to the point: Paz wrote in a postmodern style, well aware of the technique that he used and the ways in which it violated the common understanding of logic. Even knowing this, though, does not keep readers from wondering what particular lines mean, especially when they appear in a context where everything else has a meaning, even if that meaning is specific only to the boundaries of that one poem. For instance, Paz's poem "Duration" is clearly meant to make readers take a fresh look at how they perceive reality. It rewrites the rules and thus is not required to follow the standards that readers usually hold for knowledge. But there is still one section that does not fit, even within the world of this particular work. The third stanza of the poem marks a significant break in tone and subject matter from what comes before or after, and it is the reader's job to at least wonder why. If there is to be any understanding, the first step is to admit that this is a poem that ought to be understood on its own terms. Paz wrote it in the late 1950s or early 1960s, a period when he was at his most productive and most avant-garde. The influences of surrealist painting and modernist poetry can be seen in the way that he easily dispenses with the formalities of ordinary experience: water talks, trees sleep in beds, bees fan out in response to "snow-language," and so forth. Some readers find themselves put off by this heavy-handed type of free association, but it would be difficult to claim that it is pointless. Paz does not just force together opposites or unexpected images, here, the way a surrealist might. He is building toward one cumulative effect. That effect probably has to do with the words from the *I Ching* that the poem starts with, but it does not help much to look to them for understanding: they are too far removed from the poem's center to offer much help until after the poem is already understood. An epigraph like this can set the mood of a poem, but its point is to raise questions, not provide answers.

What can be safely said about this poem is that it concerns the relationship between nature and humanity. What feels like surrealism, like a constant violation of reality, is actually a continuous use of anthropomorphism, of attributing human motives and behaviors to nonhuman things. For what it is worth, Paz was known for focusing on the odd distinction that is intellectually devised between the "us" of humanity and the "them" of everything else in the universe. As Jason Wilson put it in a 1979 book about Paz, "Underlying all of Paz's poetics is a myth about nature that can be conventionally schematized as seeing the natural (good) set against the artificial (evil)." This analysis might overstate the case somewhat—there is no real indication of a judgment of good or evil in "Duration"—but it does show how integral nature is to Paz's poetry, confirming the idea that nature is a, if not *the* , key aspect of this particular work.

Nature is represented by sky and Earth, by rain and wind and thunder, by forests, by birds and a rooster and a white horse. Humanity is represented by speech and bed and kissing. The lines blur: the natural things are the ones talking to each other in their own spontaneous dialog, and the humans are the ones who lose the ability to speak, entering one another through touch, resting in the blood like genetic code instead of understanding each other intellectually. If nature is assuming human skills, then it cannot be as simple as a matter of humanity being evil and nature good, or else the good would be contaminating itself. Besides, humanity and nature are so much alike in "Duration" that there is not really any representation of what Wilson might mean by "artificial."

Different theories about this dichotomy between nature and humanity might stem out into different directions, but they fail to account for the poem's third stanza. There, the imagery does not easily fall into either category. It is nonspecific: the odor and the stem described in the first and third lines could apply to either humanity or nature, while the "hands" of the second line could be human hands or a metaphor for something else. Even though the poem is written in free verse and is not bound to any preexisting style, the style of this stanza stands out for its lack of a verb.

Stanza III seems to be describing something, or things, either a body on a stem or else an odor, a body, and a stem. The first guess is more likely, since the word "on" in the third line connects the stem to the body; if this is the case, then the odor, which is not verbally connected to all of this, can be assumed to be part of the same item. What is that item? It has many odors and many hands and an invisible stem, and it has a single whiteness (which is different from saying that it is white). It has a body that is attached to the stem somehow. While the rest of the poem uses concrete imagery that refers to specific objects that the reader can easily bring to mind, this one stanza describes a phantom, a compilation of aspects that, when added together, turn into a creature that is not of this world.

This is not a case where readers can look at all of the clues, add them up, and eventually conclude what the item in stanza III is. It is, rather, a case where the poet has put a black hole in the center of the poem, a thing that defies logic and can only be known in terms of its relationship to other parts of the poem. If it is a human body, its odors connect it to the natural essence of humans that culture tries to mask. If it is a thing of nature, its hands give it a human-like dexterity that paws, fins, wings, and antennae lack. The thing that most clearly makes it an object of the imagination, balanced between nature and humanity, is the multiplicity of it all: multiple odors, many hands. No one thing meets this description. This is a composite of all things, brought together on a stem (like a plant stem or a spine) that is invisible.

One of the few definite things about this conglomeration is its "single whiteness." There is any number of cultural or symbolic connotations that this could be referring to. A short list of things that "white" has been associated with would include purity, sterility, coldness, and extremes of heat and light. Some of these might apply to the item described in stanza III, but the poem does not give enough evidence about which ones might. What it does give, though, is another image that is only a little less mysterious

than the indescribable one here. Stanza I, which describes water and wind showing the very personal concerns that the poet might have, ends with a white horse going by. It is an odd moment, not related to what has come in the previous lines, just as the thing described in stanza III is not really related to the rest of the poem. These two white objects are connected to each other more than they are to anything else. The description of a thing with odors and hands and a body and a stem puts readers in mind of all of the aspects of reality that this poem is trying to convey; showing this weird cluster of traits as a running horse gives it beauty and grace.

Even when a poem is as free of past poetic standards as "Duration," it is still unsettling for readers to find one of six stanzas written in a different style. Octavio Paz was a cautious enough writer to know that. The third stanza seems to address the question of humanity versus nature in a different style, on a different plane of existence, than the others, but there can be no doubt that Paz meant it that way. Just before the middle of the poem, he made the decision to create an image that has attributes but no substance. This exercise of freedom is a challenge to the reader not to rest comfortably with knowing the poem's basic themes, to be willing to question the unknowable.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "Duration," in *Poetry for Students* , Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Covintree holds a bachelor's degree in English and is currently pursuing a master of fine arts in writing at Emerson College. In this essay, Covintree explores the way Paz uses the Chinese system of the I Ching *in this poem.*

In 1951 and 1952, Paz made visits to India and Japan. Somewhere during this time, Paz was introduced to the first modern translation of the *I Ching* or Book of Changes, a book of wisdom and divination. This book fascinated Paz because, as he tells Joung Kwon Tae in the interview called " *I Ching* and Poetic Creation: An Interview with Octavio Paz," Paz believes the *I Ching* "brings together at once and in a single coherent and poetic time the changes of nature and with them those, the changes, of man. . . . man not alone but in relation to . . . society."

Paz's poem "Duration" from his book *Salamander* is an early example of Eastern influence in his poetry. Paz begins this poem with an epigraph from the *I Ching* , "Thunder and wind: Duration." His epigraph comes from the 32nd hexagram Heng, a reading that combines thunder and wind to create a meaning called Duration. According to the *I Ching* , this denotes both constancy and endurance. It also represents the cyclical course of natural and human life. The upper trigram (thunder) stands for movement without, while the bottom trigram (wind) represents gentleness within. These opposing forces are like a yin and yang. Paz was interested in the polarity of the *I Ching* , and the way it divided life into an either/or equation that was always interdependent, like masculine and feminine. Following these meanings, Paz has used this epigraph to open his love poem.

Like a reading from the *I Ching* , Paz has separated his poem into six sections, each independent, each expanding on his understanding and feelings for his beloved. As Paz tells Tae, he sees this poem as "a suite of short poems" where he can obsess "on the subject of the union and separation of opposites." Though Paz has followed this structure of six sections, his poem does not follow a logical sequence of events. He moves quickly from waking to sleeping, from love making to conversation. Each section is rather short: his longest section is also his last at eight lines. Each section does not immediately connect to the next; thus, each could not stand without the others.

In the first section, Paz begins his love poem upon waking. Every action of the morning is an action toward his beloved. Paz is not the one thinking of his beloved, instead it is "the rooster," "the water," "the wind" who are waiting for the dawn to again encounter the beloved. Without her, they are restless. Paz begins this section with "sky black," and two lines down, he writes "the rooster tears the night apart." The darkness cannot be held and must be moved to make way for the beloved. In the second section, Paz shows his beloved, "as the forest in its bed of leaves." Here, in the wilderness, the rain, wind, sparks, and leaves make up her bed. In these beds, the beloved can sleep, sing, and kiss. Like the gentleness of the lower trigram of the *I Ching* hexagram, the bed becomes a fixed mark for her. From here, she is able to move outside of it and act and react to her environment. In the same sense though, when readers "meet" the beloved,

she is passively lying in bed. In the first section, the morning seemed restless waiting for her arrival. Now, in this section, she simply waits in bed and responds to the earth. All of the beloved's actions take place from her fixed mark of her bed. Until her "kiss," her actions could be seen as happening independently, without the presence of another.

With both of these first two sections, Paz uses plain and ordinary images: "rooster," "water," "night," "wind," "horse," "bed," "rain," "sparks," "forest," "leaves." What is unusual is the way he arranges them. He places items together in surprising ways. He makes the rooster an active aggressor who "tears the night apart." He personifies, or gives human characteristics to nonhuman organisms, to the wind and the water so they can "ask" questions of the reader and the poet. In the second section, Paz complicates the image of a bed by making it a "bed of rain," or a "bed of wind," or a "bed of sparks." These are unusual beds that are difficult for a reader to see initially. The easy and mundane image of a bed is shifted and transformed. To add to these new images, Paz pairs them with interesting verbs. In this way, he creates what Edward Hirsch calls "odd crossings" in his article "Octavio Paz: In Search of a Moment" in *American Poetry Review* . These disconnected images are, for Paz, one way to show the back and forth motion present in the *I Ching* . It is also a way for Paz to demonstrate how important language is to love. As he says in his interview with Tae:

There is one moment in which language points toward something beyond which is unsayable. It is the silence after language. . . . The poem, all poetry, is an organism made of words which, in the end is resolved in silence. The silence which unites hearts is founded on the word.

Paz moves from the immediate connection to the *I Ching* with the third section. He focuses further on his lover and on the endurance of their love. Here, the two lovers are together and absorbed in one another. As one body, they suddenly create a "many-handed body." By writing "on an invisible stem a single / whiteness," Paz acknowledges the deep connection that he shares with his beloved.

It is the intimacy between the two lovers that becomes increasingly more apparent throughout the poem. In the fourth section, the poet directly addresses his lover. What he expects in response is her understanding. In this section, Paz is the thunderclap, the traditional Chinese interpretation of the husband in this *I Ching* hexagram. He is the one who can share information and will be the dominant force. But, just as important for Paz and this hexagram is the wind, which can also be seen as the woods. The wind/wood must understand and respond appropriately, so that the thunderclap knows it has been heard. Both husband and wife have important roles to play; they must both "speak listen answer."

This fourth section also becomes a direct address of the poet to the *I Ching* . Like tarot cards or astrology, the *I Ching* was used by the Chinese to help answer a troubling question. It is a form of divination still in practice. When the poet says "speak listen answer me," he is not only speaking to his lover, but he is also speaking to the *I Ching* and to language. This is the force that gave him the initial response that is the epigraph. This fourth section returns to the *I Ching* directly, to the source of the first response.

Here, the poet is reflecting on what the thunder and woods must do, how they respond and react to one another, and to the *I Ching* . With the fifth section, Paz shifts the time in the poem and thus shifts the reader's attention. In this section, the speaker and lover are so tightly connected that they are a part of one another. They live in each other, he in her head, she in his blood. There is an urgency and immediacy in this section. This section is highly charged with passion and love between the "you" and "I." In the first line, the poet writes, "I enter by your eyes." With this line, the reader is left to wonder what it is the I has entered. Has he entered her soul? Their love? The marriage? The duration? Any of these answers would work. What is clear in this section is the all consuming love that is revealed.

At only four lines, this is a very short section. In addition, its direct connection to the *I Ching* is difficult to see. However, this section is one that helps to ground the reader in the romance between the lovers. It is in these four lines that their devotion is most expressly shown. It is simple and clear. At the same time, this section, like the third section, is dependent on all of the other sections.

Alone, this section would simply be melodramatic and overdone. Combined with the ideas and concepts of the other sections, this fifth stanza helps solidify the reader's understanding of love, duration, and the poem itself.

The sixth and final section is the longest and, in some ways most interesting. In this section, the poet informs the "you" as to how he will be communicating and then instructs the "you" on how to respond. Again, Paz makes strange and unusual connections. Technically, there is no such language as "snow-language" or "blood-language," yet Paz speaks of these oddities as if they are known to everyone. In explaining how these languages need to be responded to, he also reveals new connections for the reader to these languages. Somehow, a "green syllable" can answer "stone-language." A connection could be made between the stone and the color green, as they are both found in the earth. Thorpe Running, in his essay "Octavio Paz and the Magic of the Word" found in his book *The Critical Poem* says that "while the two terms of any metaphor do coexist, the distance between them is never closed, causing a never-ending contradiction." Like the possible contradiction of a connection between thunder and wind, the connections between calls and response are filled with contradiction. This section is a conglomeration of dissimilar images, connected by their disconnect.

Somehow, these uncommon connections bring with them an idea of the *I Ching* . Paz calls this idea "the double reality of time and of everything that exists: Perpetual change and perpetual reiteration" (expressed in Tae).

At the same time, these parentheses are the only place where Paz uses any punctuation in the poem. In his earlier poem "Certainty" from his book *Days and Occasions* , Paz writes, "I know that I am alive / between two parentheses." Now, in "Duration," Paz shows his aliveness. He also shows that perhaps he is not asking his lover for the response, but his own inner self, which can be found through the practice of the *I Ching* . The poet himself can vacillate between the yin and the yang.

In various sections, Paz uses repetition to shift his meaning and reemphasize his language. In this way, his images continue to turn and roll onto themselves, expanding the idea and propelling the text. It is never a simple series, these new lines push on the preceding lines to create layers. This follows his understanding of the *I Ching* and its role with language.

As he tells Tae, *I Ching* "is a way of operating within language. . . . I saw in the *I Ching* an image of the rotation of nature." It is this rotation of language with all its consistencies and inconsistencies that helps Paz express his love for another person in this poem.

Source: Kate Covintree, Critical Essay on "Duration," in *Poetry for Students* , Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Verani elucidates the influence of world philosophies on Paz's poetic push to recapture "the natural innocence of man."

Within the landscape of the 20th century, in an increasingly specialized and divided world, Octavio Paz is a writer of exceptional and diverse interests, of prodigious versatility, unusual erudition and imagination, recognized as one of the major poets of our time and as a lucid interpreter of modernity. His critical thought includes a bewildering number of fields of human activity□art, aesthetics, philosophy, Oriental religion, anthropology, psychology, political ideology. The preoccupations that cross Paz's writing□the search for lost unity and the reconciliation of man with himself and the universe, the celebration of love and of freedom of thinking, the merging of contraries, the reviving of the poetic work□converge in the reflexive prose of his essays and in a poetry that assumes the form of self-criticism and incessant interrogation, two sides of an organic whole of inseparable unity in its diversity, that constitutes an uncommon and passionate testimony of humanity. Paz is primarily a poet, considered (along with Neruda and Vallejo) as one of the truly outstanding Spanish-American poets of the 20th century.

Paz sees poetry as a path towards the revelation of man, as a means to restore authenticity. Poetic creation and erotic love are the only ways to reconcile the opposing forces of the world, the only ways to transcend solitude and reach spiritual fulfilment. During the five years that Paz lived in France (1946-51), he participated in the surrealist movement and developed a lifelong affinity with its tenets.

Paz sees surrealism as an activity of the human spirit based on the idea of rebellion, love, and freedom, as a total subversion, as a movement to recapture the natural innocence of man. The conjunction of ancient Mexican mythology and surrealism ("telluric surrealism" as termed by Benjamin Péret) guides his quest for eternal values, his desire to transcend the contradictions of humanity. "Hymn Among the Ruins" and, above all, *Piedra de sol* (*Sun Stone*) are the masterpieces of this period of his poetry. His stay in India, as ambassador of his country (1962-68), profoundly affected his vision of the world and his approach to poetry. Many concepts of Oriental thought were incorporated into his poetics: detachment from the outside world, the illusory nature of the world, the stress on natural man, the illusion of the ego, sudden illumination, transcendence through the senses, rebellion against all systems. *Ladera este* and *Blanco* include the major poems of this period.

After the early 1960s the most significant constants of Paz's poetic work are experimentation with space and the use of visual effects. The most important poems of the 1960s ("Whole Wind," *Blanco*) are constellations of juxtaposed fragments and of voices in perpetual rotation in which the simultaneity of times and spaces is the point of confluence in an inexhaustible net of relations that enrich the analytical reading of the text. In his poetry the spatial-temporal markings disappear, and all ages converge in a privileged moment, in that evanescent and fleeting, atemporal and archetypal present.

Paz liberates language from the illusion of representing an empirical reality: spaces, times, and distant cultures interweave without explicit transition and give the poem a plural meaning.

Paz is also a major essayist. Few Spanish- American writers, if any, have developed a critical system that encompasses the main intellectual currents of modern times. During almost half a century Paz has adhered to two fundamental premises: the questioning of all established truths and, above all, the passionate search for human dignity and the defence of the freedom of the human being, principles whose aim is always in Paz a recovery of the essential values of humanism.

Source: Hugo J. Verani, "Paz, Octavio," in *Reference Guide to World Literature* , 3d ed., edited by Sara Pendergast and Tom Pendergast, Vol. 1, St. James Press, 2003, pp. 771-73.

Adaptations

Octavio Paz is included with fourteen other poets discussing their craft on *Where Poems Come From* , a 1991 videocassette from the Lannan Foundation.

Paz is also included on the video *The Simple Acts of Life* , a 1993 production from the Public Broadcasting System, featuring interviews by Bill Moyers. This video is part of Moyers's *The Power of the Word* series.

In 1998, Films for the Humanities released a short video about Paz's life called *An Uncommon Poet: Octavio Paz* , featuring interviews with Paz.

The Octavio Paz Foundation operates a web page at http://www.fundacionpaz.org.mx/main .htm, with links to other sites. This page is entirely in Spanish.

Topics for Further Study

Draw a picture of a fan of bees, a canoe of lightning, or a tower of birds to show what Paz means by using these images in stanza VI.

Take one of the six sections of this poem, and build around it to create your own six-section poem.

In section IV, the poem states that "what the thunderclap says, the woods understand." Write an extended dialog between the thunderclap and the woods that shows readers what they talk about. Give each character a distinct personality.

Since this poem was inspired by a line from the *I Ching* , the proper background music for it might be Chinese; then again, the proper soundtrack for reading it might be Mexican music, because of Paz's life story; or it could be a different piece that has nothing to do with either of these cultures. Choose a piece of music that you think should accompany this poem, and write an extended explanation of why you think this poem and this music should be linked.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: In the midst of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, each side monitors Latin American countries and maintains active spy networks within them to make sure that they will not form an alliance with the other.

Today: Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Communist parties in Latin America have little support, and so most are shifting toward capitalism.

1960s: Because of the low value of the peso, American tourists flock to Mexico for cheap vacations and inexpensive merchandise.

Today: Mexico is still a popular vacation site but not because of its price: several coastal areas have built resorts that have good reputations for sun and water sports.

1960s: The environmentalist movement is launched with the publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* in 1962. The book warns of the dangers of pollution and makes readers worldwide aware of the delicate balance between humanity and nature.

Today: School children are regularly taught about environmental science and the dangers of polluting the atmosphere, but still the government puts little emphasis on developing renewable resources.

What Do I Read Next?

Many critics believe that Paz's finest work was in his extended essay *The Labyrinth of Solitude* , an extended meditation on the nature of the Mexican people and their character. It is now available in a 1985 edition from Grove Press.

The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz, 1957- 1987 was edited by Paz's friend and collaborator Eliot Weinberger. The bilingual edition is available from New Directions, published in 1991.

Paz begins "Duration" with a line from the *I Ching* , the ancient Chinese book of numerology. A current edition, assembled and translated by Taoist master Alfred Huang, is available from Inner Traditions International under the title *The Complete "I Ching": The Definitive Translation* (1998).

Paz's poetry is often compared to that of Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentinian writer of the same generation whose short stories have the same metaphysical quality Paz employed. Some of Borges's best and most original work is included in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writing* , published in 1998 by W. W. Norton.

Further Study

Altamiranda, Daniel, "Literary Theory and Criticism," in *Mexican Literature: A History* , edited by David William Foster, University of Texas Press, 1994, pp. 341-63.

This essay gives the background of literary theory in Mexico. Naturally, Paz is one of the central figures discussed, but Altamiranda presents other important critics around him.

Needleman, Ruth, "Poetry and the Reader," in *The Perpetual Present: The Poetry of Octavio Paz* , edited by Ivar Ivask, University of Oklahoma Press, 1973, pp. 35-43.

Needleman's essay examines what makes Paz's intentions different from those of other poets, focusing mainly on the works in his collection *Blanco* .

Quiroga, Jose, *Understanding Octavio Paz* , University of South Carolina Press, 1999.

Quiroga provides an overview of Paz's life and work.

Running, Thorpe, *The Critical Poem: Borges, Paz, and Other Language-Centered Poets in Latin America* , Bucknell University Press, 1996.

Running shows Paz in context with other similarly minded poets, focusing on *Salamander* as one of the best examples of the poet's relationship to language.

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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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