Ghazal Study Guide

Ghazal by Elizabeth Spires

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Introduction

The title of Elizabeth Spires's poem "Ghazal" does not indicate anything about its subject but describes the style in which it was written. A ghazal is a form of poetry that originated in Iran many centuries ago and made its way throughout the Middle East and Asia primarily through the extension of the Muslim influence in that part of the world. Over the years, people of other cultures and geographies began to experiment with ghazals, and today they may be found in the United States and many other western countries. The basic structure of a ghazal is generally retained by contemporary poets, although not many adhere strictly to the ancient rules of the original Persian poets.

Spires's "Ghazal," which appears in her most recent volume of poetry called *Now the Green Blade Rises* (2002), is a reflection on the death of her mother, as well as a contemplation on the inevitability of the poet's own aging and eventual death. It is elegiac in tone and filled with quiet solitude, recalling specific moments of the tragic event: the phone call informing her of the news, the airplane flight to her mother's town, the funeral, the jewelry she inherited, snippets of pleasant childhood memories. All of these thoughts are conveyed in brief images presented in couplets and maintaining some of the formal structure of a traditional ghazal.

Author Biography

Elizabeth Spires was born in 1952 in Lancaster, Ohio. She grew up in a Catholic home, attending both parochial and public schools, and developed a love of reading early on. Her parents were very supportive of her ambition to be a writer and when it came time for college, Spires left her small hometown and headed east to New York where she enrolled as an English major at Vassar College. Her initial intent was to be a short story writer, as she had been reading primarily stories, novels, and biographies since childhood. But at Vassar, Spires began taking poetry workshops and before long decided to try her hand at writing and publishing poems.

Spires received her bachelor's degree from Vassar in 1974 and returned to Ohio where she worked as an editor for a textbook publisher in Columbus, as well as a freelance writer of children's books. Her talent as a young poet is evidenced in the prestigious journals that published her early work—the *American Poetry Review*, the *New Yorker*, *Poetry*, and the *Partisan Review*, among others. In 1978, she moved to Baltimore to pursue a master's degree at Johns Hopkins University. The collection of poems she presented as her thesis in the master's program turned into her first published book in 1981, called *Globe*.

Since then, Spires has published four additional collections of poems, including *Now the Green Blade Rises* in 2002. This is her first volume of work written after her mother's death in 1998, and many of the poems in it reflect feelings of loss, mourning, and aging. "Ghazal"—originally published in the Fall 2001 edition of *Ploughshares*—is one such poem from the collection. In addition to poetry, Spires has also published six books for children, most recently *The Big Meow* in 2002. Her awards include the Academy of American Poets Prize (1974), National Endowment for the Arts fellowships (1981, 1992), the Pushcart Prize (1981, 1995), and a Guggenheim Fellowship in Poetry (1992), among others.

In 1985, Spires married the novelist Madison Smartt Bell, and the two had a daughter in 1991.

Plot Summary

Lines 1—2

The structure of Spires's "Ghazal" will be addressed later in detail, but one cannot analyze the poem's meaning without acknowledging the importance of its style. Contemporary writers of ghazals take some liberties with the original standard form but leave enough intact to make the framework recognizable. In this poem, Spires uses a pair of homonyms instead of rhyming words in the couplets, and the like-sounding terms she has selected greatly strengthen the work's message and tone. "Morning" and "mourning" produce an intriguing play off of one another throughout, and the controlled shift from one to the other conveys the overall somber mood of both words.

In the first two lines, the setting is doleful, with the speaker hearing her "name in the black air," or the darkness of "early morning." She claims it is "called out," but it is ambiguous as to whether her name is actually spoken by someone in the room or on the telephone or she has only dreamed she hears it. Line 2 suggests the latter, and it sets the tone of the remainder of the poem: "a future of mourning" brought on by a foreboding "premonition" of death and sorrow. These lines also mark the first use of the word "black," which will appear twice more in keeping with the general melancholy of the work.

Lines 3—4

These lines introduce a second person into the poem, later disclosed as the speaker's mother. Line 3 implies that every time a mother and daughter meet over the course of their lives and say their usual goodbyes, they are actually "rehears[ing]" for the final time they will utter the words. Line 4 describes the last time the speaker sees her mother alive. They are "in a desert . . . on a white September morning," apparently before the daughter is leaving to go home. Note the description of the morning spent with her mother as *white*—completely opposite the *black* morning air that surrounds her upon her mother's death. This is the first juxtaposition of black and white in the poem. It will occur again, but with an interesting shift in context.

Lines 5—6

The gist of these lines is that the speaker has been informed of her mother's passing, and she must fly out West for the funeral. But the images are more intriguing than that. The "call" in line 5 refers back to the speaker's name "called out" in line 1 and adds to the ambiguity of whether the latter is an actual word spoken or simply part of a bad dream. In literal terms, it makes no difference; but, poetically, the effect is intriguing, even enigmatic. To retain the ghazal style, the word "morning" (or "mourning," in this case) needs to appear in the second line of the couplet. Here, Spires works it aptly into

a scenario about flying west through time zones and finding the time of day upon arrival the same as it was at departure.

Lines 7—8

In lines 7 and 8, the juxtaposition of black and white returns, but this time the distinction between black as *negative* and white as *positive* is not apparent. In fact, the "blank whiteness" that "outlines / everything" connotes as much sorrow, grief, and foreboding as "black air" does in line 1. The speaker says she has "always worn black," which may mean, of course, a simple preference in fashion, but the implication here is more profound. Her confession of always wearing black indicates a longtime sense of dread and a fear of death□her own or a loved one's. The "white" of a sunny September morning in line 4 has become hollow, empty, and blank on the morning of her mother's funeral.

Lines 9—10

This poem is not only about sorrow and grief but inheritance and family bonds as well. Lines 9 and 10 describe a pair of pearl earrings□note that they are *black* pearls□that the deceased mother has left to her daughter. The jewelry has been passed down from grandmother to daughter to granddaughter, symbolizing the importance of a direct link between the generations of women in the family. The mother's simple note that they are the grandmother's "*Good*" earrings suggests not only the jewelry's own value, but also the value of bloodlines and family heritage. The doleful tone of "Ghazal" is sustained with the mention of the ink in which the mother wrote her note□it, too, is black, the "color of mourning."

Lines 11—12

On the surface, these lines appear to be the only ones in the poem containing joyful, positive images, yet the descriptions include language that suggests otherwise. The speaker's memory of the songs her mother "used to sing" evokes a contemplative sadness over the fact that she will no longer hear them. The "morning glories" are "Blue," and one imagines that their spelling could just as easily be *mourning* glories. An image of death is intrinsic in the "tree of heaven," and even the "owl" that sits there implies a lonely, mournful existence. The "sacred mornings" of the speaker's childhood suggests not only an upbringing in a religious home, but also a reverence for those times long ago when death and grief were not prevalent.

Line 13

Line 13 returns to the idea of family bonds and inheritance but, here, what is passed down from generation to generation is death. This time, the speaker adds a fourth generation to the line□her own daughter, before whom she herself will die. The

repetition of the word "before" adds a dirge-like quality to line 13, sounding out the dull dreariness of inescapable fate: "Your mother before you. Her mother before her. I, before my daughter."

Line 14

Line 14 is a quote attributed to the speaker's mother, though whether they are words she actually ever spoke or a remark the daughter can imagine her making is irrelevant. Its importance lies in the plain, direct resignation of the message: each generation experiences the same pain of inevitable loss as the ones before and the ones after it. In this sense, all of a family's women are at one time or another "*daughters in mourning*."

Line 15

This line defines the speaker while at the same time employs a rule of traditional ghazal structure. The poet identifies herself as the "firstborn" daughter of a mother whose name is also "*Elizabeth*." Calling herself a "namesake" serves to strengthen the ties between parent and child that have already been well established in the poem. A typical traditional ghazal requires the use of the poet's name or penname in the first line of the final couplet. Spires manages this technique flawlessly here in both structure and in keeping with the overall message of the work.

Line 16

The last line of the poem again resorts to repetition of the main homonym to express the somber resignation to life's unavoidable outcome. The poet, born "on a May morning," cannot ever return to the innocent, unknowing comfort and warmth of that day. Instead, she recognizes that time and loss take their toll on the human spirit and eventually one accepts that what used to be can never be the same again.

Themes

Mortality and Grief

"Ghazal" is a poem of grieving. Its central focus is on the overwhelming sorrow of a daughter recalling the death of her mother, but there is an undercurrent of *generalized* sadness at work too. While the main human subject appears to be the mother, the speaker's presence in every line is heavy and foreboding. Her grief stems not only from her parent's death but from recognition of her own mortality as well.

Losing a loved one naturally brings about suffering and bereavement in those left behind. The speaker is pained by the memories of her mother's songs and flowers and the "sacred" times they had together when she was a child. She feels deep sorrow in recalling the last time she saw her mother, apparently saying their usual goodbyes after a visit at the parent's home out in the West. Neither, of course, knows that it is the final time they will see one another, yet the daughter claims that *all* their previous "partings were rehearsals for the final scene." This rather ominous assertion implies an ever-present sense of mortality□a nagging thought of death in the back of the mind even when one is very much alive and healthy.

Throughout "Ghazal," the speaker mixes the grief over losing her mother with disturbing allusions to the inevitability of her own dying. In a dream, she experiences a premonition of death, supposedly her mother's, yet perhaps the vision is of her personal "future of mourning" rather than the parent's demise in particular. She makes a point of noting that she has "always worn black," suggesting a resignation to her own mortality as well as to that of others. In the end, her grief also becomes a resignation, as she accepts that she "cannot go back" to the morning of her birth, which represents a time before there is an awareness of sorrow and death. It is common for one who is middle-aged□as Spires was at the time she wrote this poem□to begin to think more about mortality and to dread what the future will surely bring, especially as the signs of aging force the issue. But those thoughts are intensified even more when one experiences the death of a parent. In a sense, the poet has lost not only her mother but a vital part of her own being that has died with her.

Love, Loss, and Family Ties

It is easy to see "Ghazal" as a poem whose main theme focuses on doom and gloom with no signs of a positive outcome whatsoever. Yet, it is a poem that needs to be read in context with the overall theme of the work in which it is included. *Now the Green Blade Rises* derives its title from the lyrics of a song by the same name written by John MacLeod Campbell Crum in 1928. Part of the lyrics preface Spires's book and suggest a theme of hope and redemption rising from the ashes of despair:

Now the green blade rises from the buried grain,

Wheat that in the dark earth many days has lain;

Love lives again, that with the dead has been;

Love is come again like wheat arising green.

While Crum wrote the entire lyric as an Easter poem commemorating the death and resurrection of Jesus, Spires uses the first stanza to imply that ties among loved ones may indeed live on even after the physical being is gone. In "Ghazal," she establishes the presence of the mother-daughter bond in the first line of the poem with the phrase, "My name in the black air." It seems obvious that she refers to her own name, but at the end of the poem one learns that "*Elizabeth*" is also her mother's name. The ambiguity serves to blend the bloodline into a continuous flow, stressing the importance of strong family ties, among both the living and the dead.

Loss of life is undeniably a major factor in the poem, but even such morbidity ties generations together. The mother is attributed with explaining that "*We are all daughters in mourning*," and the speaker confirms that notion with, "Your mother before you. Her mother before her. I, before my daughter." Despite the overwhelming sorrow imparted in these statements by both mother and daughter, there is also an unmistakable softness and genuine love portrayed as well. The fact that such a doleful, melancholy poem can reverberate with love beyond loss, and family ties beyond death suggests that the poet's experience may not be as hopeless as it seems.

Style

The ghazal (pronounced "guzzle,") originated in Iran in the tenth century, growing out of an earlier, lengthier Arabic form of poetry. The brevity of traditional ghazals□usually no more than twelve couplets□and their rich, concentrated imagery eventually made them the most popular style of poetry in Iran. As the Muslim influence spread throughout the Middle East and Asia, ghazals grew in popularity throughout the region, especially in India and Pakistan. In more recent years, European and American poets have experimented with this form, though usually not in keeping with the precise pattern of the original ghazals from Iran.

Spires's poem follows enough of the ghazal style to make its construction recognizable, though it by no means adheres to it strictly. Each couplet of a traditional ghazal is written as a self-sustained unit that expresses a complete thought and could stand alone as a poem if extracted from the ghazal. The lines are composed in the same meter and always open with a rhyming couplet. The rhyme of the first couplet is then repeated in the second line of each succeeding couplet, making the typical rhyming pattern AA, BA, CA, DA, and so forth. In "Ghazal," the meter fluctuates, and the lines of the opening couplet do not end with rhyming words but with homonyms: "morning" and "mourning." Instead of ending succeeding couplets with words that rhyme with "morning," Spires simply repeats the homonyms at the end of each couplet's second line.

Traditional ghazals also require that the two or three words preceding the last word of the first line rhyme with their counterparts in the second line of the opening couplet and then in alternate lines throughout the poem. Obviously, this rule is particularly challenging and one that many western poets do not follow. In "Ghazal," it means that the words "the early" from the opening line would have to rhyme with "future of" in the second line, "white September" in the fourth, "was still" in the sixth, and so on.

The final couplet of an original ghazal often includes the name or penname of the poet, and Spires does conform to this tradition. The intriguing twist in this case, however, is that her first name, Elizabeth, is also her mother's, so she essentially includes her own name and the name of the poem's subject at the same time. The reason for this inclusion is to allow the poet an opportunity to express his or her state of mind and to become a personal part of the poem. Spires accomplishes this in her final couplet, but one may argue that she does so in all the preceding couplets as well.

Historical Context

The subject of Spires's poem "Ghazal" is extremely personal and unlikely to be influenced by cultural or political events of the time it was written. Its title, however, is apparently disconnected from what the work is about, identifying only the structure and perhaps implying that such a subjective poem is better served with a simple and benign name. But the ghazal form of poetry itself embodies a long history in parts of the world largely unknown or misunderstood by many contemporary westerners. In recent years□during the period after Spires's mother's death in 1998 and the subsequent publication of her book based on it in 2002□the area where ghazals began has had a profound impact on events and people all across the globe.

Tension between Iran and the United States has been escalating over the past two decades, leading to the U.S. suspension of all trade with the Middle Eastern nation in 1995. This move came about amid accusations that Iran was a state supporter of terrorist groups and was also attempting to develop nuclear weapons. Despite the election of Mohammed Khatami, a moderately liberal Muslim cleric, to the presidency in the late 1990s, no relations with the U.S. government were established.

Within Iran, civil turmoil has also been escalating since 1999 when conservative, hard-line members of the government placed new restrictions on the free press. Pro-democracy students held mass demonstrations to protest the move at Tehran University in the capital and at other major colleges across the country. The hard-liners reacted with demonstrations in favor of fundamental Islamic laws, and the new president, who remains in power as of this writing, was ineffective in resolving the conflict. Instead, Khatami's progressive political views have been harshly criticized and all but squelched by the conservative Guardian Council in association with the fundamentalist Ayatollah Khamenei. In 2002, Khatami called for legislation to limit the powers of the Guardian Council and restore presidential powers to enforce the constitution, but the council has not relented thus far. Student demonstrations for social and political reforms continue, and relations with the United States remain nonexistent.

Pakistan and India also figure heavily into world events of the past few years, stemming from a long history of tension and violence between the two nations, primarily caused by a land dispute in the region of Kashmir. In 1998, the United States placed sanctions against both countries after India detonated underground nuclear devices in a seeming show of might, and Pakistan retaliated with its own series of nuclear tests. In 1999, Pakistani troops entered Indian territory in Kashmir and weeks of intense fighting ensued before Pakistan withdrew. The two nations were on the brink of war again in 2002, spurred mainly by escalating attacks by Muslim militants in India purportedly crossing over from Pakistan. The crisis ended only after Pakistani president General Pervez Musharraf aided in stopping state-sponsored guerrilla infiltration into Indian-controlled Kashmir.

Musharraf's relationship with the United States has come full circle since the 1998 U.S. sanctions on Pakistan. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were linked to

Osama bin Laden, the United States lifted the sanctions and asked for Pakistan's help in securing bin Laden from the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Musharraf's efforts to persuade the Taliban to cooperate were fruitless, but Pakistan agreed to allow U.S. fighter planes to cross its airspace and U.S. troops to have bases there when the American military action in Afghanistan began in late 2001. Over time, Musharraf proved to be a welcomed ally of the Bush administration despite fierce opposition from many fundamentalist Pakistani leaders and citizens. In early 2002, Musharraf made a public denouncement of religious extremism, citing its detrimental effect on Pakistani society, and vowed that no terrorist groups would be tolerated in his country.

Musharraf's condemnation of Islamic extremism is a major controversy in some areas of the Middle East and western Asia, but much of the world views it as a progressive step forward in the war on terror. The fact remains, however, that in lands where everyday living is dominated by violence, hatred, and economic suffering, the rich cultural heritages of people□including their literature, art, poetry, and history□are often overshadowed simply by the struggle to survive.

Critical Overview

Spires's work in both poetry and children's books has been well received and admired since she first began publishing it. Her poems are most often praised for the simplicity of their style and richness of their imagery. Her tone is recognized as soft and contemplative, and she is noted for choosing words that connect to the reader's own experiences. Some critics have suggested that her latest collection, *Now the Green Blade Rises*, is more melancholy and spiritual than previous books, as its inspiration was the death of her mother. In a book review for *The Antioch Review*, critic Ned Balbo states, "Spires's book of growth and mourning . . . explores the twinned impulse to sing and to lament with poems as thoughtfully lyrical as any she has written." In regard to a poem from the collection about parents and children, Balbo claims, "This understanding of opposing forces□toward life and death, future and past□provides the underlying tension of Spires's work: she remains a poet for whom Metaphysical is both a living tradition and a subtly shaded intellectual stance." Balbo's final assertion that "her sacramental eye remains that of one of our best, and most distinctive, poets" is evidence of Spires's achievement in contemporary American poetry.

If any negative comments crop up in critical reviews of *Now the Green Blade Rises*, they are generally benign and mixed with positive statements. For instance, a review in *Publishers Weekly* says that "The death of the poet's mother occasions this fifth collection's opening sequence, a mixture of narrative pieces and sentimental lyrics, which generally depict a world flattened and bleached by grief." Accusing Spires of writing *sentimental* poems is not the harshest of criticism and this reviewer seems to allow for it based on their sorrowful inspiration. Overall, the reviews have been good, and Spires continues to be recognized as a twenty-first-century poet worth reading.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill examines "Ghazal" as a part of Spires's overall theme of a continuous life/death cycle, notes its similarity to her other poems, and suggests a preoccupation with melancholia in middle age.

An individual poem pulled from a collection in which a recurring theme runs through most of the works may be read, enjoyed, analyzed, and understood on its own; however, reading it in context with its partner poems contributes to a deeper, well-rounded comprehension of its message and inspiration. "Ghazal" is one poem in a volume of many poems about the inevitable passing of time and what it means to the human being□aging, sadness, loss, fear, and death. But it does more than share an overall theme with other poems in the volume. It also shares images, subject matter, tone, even specific descriptions with some of them, and not just those in *Now the Green Blade Rises*. In Spires's previous collection, *Worldling*, many of the concepts bear an unmistakable resemblance to the melancholia that pervades the poet's latest book.

The preface to *Now the Green Blade Rises* includes an inscription to Spires's mother, commemorating her birth and death dates, and four lines from John MacLeod Campbell Crum's Easter lyric, of the same name, commemorating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Crum's message is intended to inspire hope and renewed spirit, and one would like to think that Spires's purpose is the same. And perhaps it is. Yet, there is a conspicuous gloom that hangs over her use of the lines, "Love lives again that with the dead has been; / Love is come again like wheat arising green." If the dolor is not apparent from the book's preface, it is more evident in a poem from the collection also bearing the name "Now the Green Blade Rises" and including the same four lines from Crum's lyric.

In "Ghazal," one of the early images is of a haunting "premonition dreamed" that the speaker experiences prior to learning of her mother's death. She claims to hear her "name in the black air, called out in the early morning," but it is unclear at this point whether someone is actually calling to wake her up or if someone in her dream is speaking her name. In "Now the Green Blade Rises," the image is the same, only less ambiguous: "I had a dream, black and pictureless. / You were calling my name / over a great distance. It hung / suspended in the dark air." The "you" is conclusively the speaker's mother in this poem, and the general pall that overshadows the mood is conveyed in the color black as it is in "Ghazal." Both poems use connotations of darkness and emptiness to portray the speaker's mindset: "black air," "blank whiteness," and "ink the color of mourning" in "Ghazal" and "the world is ash," "black and pictureless," and "dark air" in "Now the Green Blade Rises."

Toward the end of the collection's title poem, the lines from Crum appear, followed by Spires's three closing lines: "There, soul to soul, / we would have forever / to finally speak again." Unlike the old Easter lyric's attempt to inspire the joy of renewed life,

Spires's end-thought suggests that only after her own death will the speaker be able to talk with her mother again. The same fatalism is evoked in the speaker's final statement in "Ghazal": "I cannot go back to that morning." Both works close with a sad, resigned melancholy—that of a middle-aged daughter coming to terms with a parent's death, as well as with dread and recognition of her own death.

It is not surprising nor even remarkable that a collection of poems stemming from the loss of a loved one would concentrate on themes of grief and depression. In "Ghazal," one can understand—and forgive—the fact that the speaker brings other generations into her morbid world, including her own daughter. The line, "Your mother before you. Her mother before her. I, before my daughter" speaks to the ominous connection between mothers and daughters, a link that translates into an inheritance of death in the poem. This grim message, wrapped in its sorrowful tone, is acceptable, if not expected, considering the inspiration for it is a profound loss. But why would the same despairing sentiment apply to a wonderful *gain*—that is, to the birth of a child and a new life just beginning?

The impetus for Spires's second-most recent volume of poems, *Worldling*, was the birth of her daughter. Obviously, not every aspect of having a baby, raising a child, and dealing with all the issues of new motherhood is sheer bliss. There are undoubtedly problems—moments of fear and self-doubt, anger and frustration when routines are drastically altered, possibly even flickers of regret or dread. But one may safely assume that these thoughts are fairly common and will come and go in the normal course of strengthening the bonds between mother and child. What, though, can one assume about a mother's overwhelming sense of pending loss, even as her new life arrives? If one line from one poem expresses this unusual and distressing mindset, it is the final line of "The First Day," from *Worldling*: "*I have had a child. Now I must live with death*."

The message here is both remarkable and provocative—and perhaps it helps explain the speaker's inclusion of her daughter in the chain of dying mothers and daughters mentioned in "Ghazal." The claim from this poem that "*We are all daughters in mourning*" rings a mournful bell indeed, but, apparently, its inspiration does not lie only in the death of the speaker's mother. Instead, it goes backwards, at least to the birth of her own daughter, several years before her mother even died.

In "Ghazal," Spires uses a matter-of-fact listing of how generations pass away—grandmother before mother, mother before daughter, etc.—to depict a quiet surrender to time's passing. In "The First Day," these lines describe the same resignation: "That's how it is in this world, birth, death, / matter-of-fact, happening like that." The difference, of course, is that the former poem is inspired by death and the latter by birth. It is as though no distinction can be made between beginnings and endings because a beginning always leads to an ending, so why separate them? In various interviews, Spires has been known to lament the coming of middle age, seeing it more as the beginning of the end instead of the middle of anything. Her poems from the volumes produced during this time in her life reflect heavily this melancholy and fatalistic point of view.

The lines borrowed from Crum's Easter lyric, which make up the preface to *Now the Green Blade Rises*, play an ambiguous role in Spires's message, as one is not really *sure* that the words are meant to imply hope and rebirth or simply bemoan the fact of inevitable death. In *Worldling*, the preface to a poem called "Easter Sunday 1955"□comprised of lines written by nineteenth-century British novelist Anthony Trollope in a letter□leaves no room for doubt: "*Why should anything go wrong in our bodies? / Why should we not all be beautiful? Why should there be decay? why death? / and, oh, why, damnation*?"

In short, this poem details a memory of the speaker in which she was a child visiting her grandmother along with her parents. The setting then moves forward to the present as she watches her own daughter gather Easter eggs and mournfully admits that she finds herself "too quickly, / in the here-and-now moment of my fortieth year." The poem ends with the lines: "Beautiful child, / how thoughtlessly we enter the world! / How free we are, how bound, put here in love's name /□death's, too□to be happy if we can." Once again, the positive is counteracted by the negative. A child may be "free" but also "bound"; she may be born in "love's name," but in "death's too."

Reading Spires's work created prior to *Now the Green Blade Rises* and reading the poems that surround "Ghazal" in this latest collection give one a profound sense of *knowing* where this particular work comes from. The reader knows why it begins with a "premonition dreamed"□a preoccupation with death is generally ominous. The reader understands why the speaker has "always worn black" and why the dark color blends so easily into "a blank whiteness"□there is no difference between beginnings and endings, no distinction between black and white. And, perhaps most telling, the reader knows why the poet chose to create her ghazal using two homonyms as opposed to two rhyming words. She was born on "a May morning" and took her place in the long line of "*daughters in mourning*." One need not look for any division between the two.

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

Critical Essay #2

Covintree is a graduate student and expository writing instructor in the Writing, Literature, and Publishing department at Emerson College. In this essay, Covintree explores Spires's poem in terms of formal elements of structure as well as how structure creates poetic tension.

Following in the footsteps of the ancient Turks and Persians, Spires includes a poem titled "Ghazal" in her fifth book of poems, *Now the Green Blade Rises*. In Spires's case, this poem is a direct elegy for her mother, who died in 1998, and to whom the collection is dedicated. The first section of this book is filled with poems of loss and grief, and Spires uses this specific poem to move the reader through the initial days after her mother's death. In a 1995 interview for the *Southwest Review*, Spires told A.V. Christie that she believes "everything is connected and that we go on in some form or fashion and possibly that form or fashion leads us back into physical existence." Based on this quote and the title of her poem, it is apparent that Spires is aware of how important structure is to a poem. Spires chooses the ghazal form to echo her obsession and meditation surrounding her mother's death.

In his essay "Writing the Reader's Life," which is found in the collection *Poets Teaching Poets*, Dobyns qualifies the type of structure necessary for poetry: "[i]t is the formal elements of language, texture, pacing, and tone imposed upon the informal elements." Spires uses the formal elements of the ghazal to organize the informal emotion of her grief. This form has certain specifications and rules. A traditional ghazal is written in couplets with a rhyme scheme of *aa*, *ba*, *ca* etc. Not only are demands of language within this form, but there is also a demand on the theme of the poem. According to the *New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, "the principal subject of the ghazal is earthly or mystical love, and the mood is melancholy, expressing sadness over separation from the beloved." Such a practice of governing a theme with a form recognizes the role formal elements can play in expressing the informal elements that Stephen Dobyns defines as "action, emotion, setting, and idea."

The primary informal elements Spires wrestles with are action and emotion. As stated earlier, her poem begins with the late night call telling of her mother's death and moves from there. For this ghazal, the poet's mother is the lost beloved, which moves the love out of mysticism or romance and allows it to enter a type of unconditional existence. As Spires explains in the interview with Christie

[t]he 'big' poems in our lives are about our doubts, fears, conflicts, and passions□all the emotions we spend so much time and energy trying to ignore and repress so that we can get through day-to-day life. But sooner or later, . . . the 'dragon' has to be dealt with.

By this time in her own life, Spires was a mother herself. While this shift in her own life influenced her understanding of the world, her mother's death is indeed a very "big" moment in the poet's life. The speaker of this poem must deal with her own dragons and travel across the country to wrestle with memory and mortality.

The reader can assume that the poet and speaker are the same and not simply an anonymous speaker because this follows in the tradition of the ghazal form. Since the twelfth century, writers of ghazals have been incorporating their name, or some variation of it, at the end of the poem. What is especially effective about this structural element in terms of this poem is that the author's name is the same as her mother's. In a sense, this poem is about the author's own death not simply because she is also named Elizabeth but because a mother is the life-bringer. The "Elizabeth" spoken of at the end of the poem is representative of more than one thing: the writer, the ghost, and the mother.

Within the form of a ghazal, each stanza is supposed to stand alone so that the final result is more an accumulation of related but separate thoughts than a logical progression. In Spires's case, it is an accumulation of events surrounding her mother's death, an accretion of minutiae that when taken together form an imperfect portrait of her emotional self.

This poem's mood is somber and is expressed well through the tone of the poem. Though her lines are long, the length allows the reader to absorb each line before moving to the next. If the line length does not make the reader pause, every line is stopped at least once by a comma, period, or other type of punctuation, with the intent to slow the reader down and give greater weight to each sentence. Spires moves the reader carefully through each line, building into her ideas little by little. As her poem progresses, the sentences become more distorted and shift into phrases and ideas: "Your mother before you. Her mother before her." Spires has removed verbs and replaced them with the ideas that swell together as memories of her mother. Like the stillness of her mother, many of her sentences no longer contain an action. These sentences reinforce the meditative and melancholy tone brought on by the loss of the beloved.

Spires's use of language also helps create the mood of her poem. In following the ghazal's form, the word she chooses to repeat is "morning." From the first stanza, she uses morning's homonym, "mourning." There is a softness and a settled-ness in her word choice and repetition that pacifies the reader into a ruminative reflection on loss. When the poem moves away from such soothing language it is to add to the tension of the poem and the involvement of the reader. Along with formal elements, Dobyns lists a second part of structure in his essay. The second part of poetic structure, according to Dobyns, is "the creation of tension to make the reader want to know what is going to happen: the making and controlling of anticipation." From the first line, Spires works with this kind of structure.

Since Spires begins the poem with the speaker asleep in bed, Spires immediately pushes the reader into an intimate and personal scene. She has brought the reader into the darkest moments of night and throws the reader into the immediacy of her experience. It is an intimacy literally revealed through sound, by a call. Sonically, the line moves smoothly until the cacophonous fifth word "black" is used to describe "air." The lightness and ethereal elements of air are broken by the heavy sharpness of the preceding word. After the pause of air, the sharpness of "black" returns with "called."

The word "called" almost mirrors the earlier word with the repetition of the sharp *k* sound and the *l* sound as well. The words even have a reflexive effect with the *b* and *d* looking in to the most intense moment of that line, the call of her mother's death. Her late night phone call that tells of an ending is now the catalyst for this reflective poem.

Starting a poem with an ending, the poem continues to move out of any chronological order. From the pronouncement of death, the poem moves back and forth between traveling to the funeral and memories of the mother. Even the moments happening in the present are blurred in terms of the sequence of events. Are the "black pearl earrings" found before or after the speaker decides what to wear. The actual details of this sequence are trivial, and so Spires works in terms of the poem's pattern and moves from questions of clothes to an item of clothing. In addition, while the poem begins "on a white September morning," it ends with a reference to a "May morning." In the final line, the poet writes "I cannot go back to that morning," and it is both of those mornings that have become inaccessible.

At one point, Spires even appears to stop time when she writes "impossible, but the sun / didn't move." This moment of stasis echoes her emotional numbness. By the end of the poem, the structure of time is completely blurred. Spires is writing to a ghost (her mother), and simple chronological time is no longer important. Instead, a larger scale of time reveals itself, one of generations. In this poem, it is the generations that are essential in coping with death. It is her mother's words that make this clear near the end of the poem: "we are all daughters in mourning." The inevitability acts as a type of salve. Even her own name, the same as her mother's, demonstrates the impact of generations. Though one Elizabeth is dead, another is still alive and still a mother. Like the generations, this name stretches beyond the poet, beyond motherhood, beyond the reader, and beyond the poem.

Source: Kate Covintree, Critical Essay on "Ghazal," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

A videotape of Spires's interview with Michael Collier in 2003 is part of *The Writing Life Videos* series produced by HoCoPoLitSo at Howard Community College in Maryland. Spires discusses the poems from *Now the Green Blade Rises*.

Topics for Further Study

Try to write a ghazal in strict traditional form. What is the greatest challenge with this style? How does it manipulate the subject of the poem?

Research several traditional ghazals translated into English from their original language(s). Are their subjects similar to one another? Discuss their similarities and differences, specifically addressing the couplets as they stand on their own and how they form the poems as a whole.

In Spires's poem, the speaker's mother says, "*We are all daughters in mourning*." If a father tells his son, "We are all sons in mourning," is there a difference in connotation? If so, what role does gender play in the message of this poem?

Discuss Spires's use of colors in "Ghazal." What do black, white, and blue have in common? What other colors may have worked as well and why? If no others would work, why not?

What Do I Read Next?

To understand and appreciate the development and mainstays of a poet over time, one should read both the latest and the earliest of the poet's material. Spires's first volume is *Globe* (1981), collected from poems she composed as a master's student. Though she was a very young writer at the time, these poems show the maturity and insight of one much more experienced. They make for an interesting comparison to the poems in her later books.

Rooms Are Never Finished (2003), by renowned Indian poet Agha Shahid Ali, is a striking collection of ghazals inspired by the recent death of his mother. Like Spires's book based on her own mother's death, Ali's poems explore loss and family bonds, as well as the journey back to his homeland of Kashmir to lay his mother to rest.

There are thousands of websites about ghazals, many offering helpful insights into the history, form, and current application of this style of poetry. One of the best is the *AHA! Poetry* site at http://www.ahapoetry.com/ghazal.htm featuring easily understandable commentary on ghazals, the rules of their form, and a nice selection of sample poems. This site is an online branch of AHA Books of Gualala, California.

The award-winning author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, Madeline L'Engle collaborates with her photographer daughter, Maria Rooney, in a wonderful collection of both prose and photos called simply *Mothers and Daughters*. L'Engle's stirring text about family bonds among women is woven through Rooney's beautiful black and white photography of mothers and daughters from all races and ethnic backgrounds.

Further Study

Ali, Agha Shahid, ed., *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*, Wesleyan University Press, 2000.

This is a collection of over one hundred modern and contemporary poets, including Diane Ackerman, W. S. Merwin, William Matthews, and John Hollander, writing ghazals in their native English language. The introduction and afterward by editor Agha Shahid Ali provides excellent details on what a ghazal is, how challenging it is to write ghazals in English, and how the process differs from writing ghazals in their original Middle Eastern languages.

Christie, A. V., "The Power of the Visible Is the Invisible: An Interview with Elizabeth Spires," in *Southwest Review*, Vol. 80, No. 1, Winter 1995, pp. 35—57.

This lengthy interview with Spires provides excellent insight into the way the poet feels about her own work and that of others, what has inspired her to write, how she selects topics, the importance of form in writing, and a host of personal opinions on a variety of topics. Although the interview took place several years before the poems of *Now the Green Blade Rises* were composed, she explores many of the same themes that appear in her latest collection.

Spires, Elizabeth, *Worldling*, W.W. Norton, 1995.

This collection by Spires is the one preceding *Now the Green Blade Rises*, and the similarities in themes are remarkable. *Worldling* explores the subjects of birth, death, change, and immortality, specifically the birth of her own daughter and the subsequent struggle of the poet to come to terms with aging, family, and pending loss.

Taylor, Henry, "In the Everlasting Present: The Poetry of Elizabeth Spires," in the *Hollins Critic*, Vol. 39, No. 2, April 2002, pp. 1—19.

Taylor writes in depth about Spires's themes and style in this substantial article. Written several months before the release of *Now the Green Blade Rises*, Taylor's review of her work is thorough, insightful, and appealing throughout.

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Spires, Elizabeth, *Now the Green Blade Rises*, W. W. Norton, 2002, pp. 25, 33—34.

□□□, *Worldling*, W. W. Norton, 1995, pp. 11, 33—34.

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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.

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�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.

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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.

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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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