The Greatest Grandeur Study Guide

The Greatest Grandeur by Pattiann Rogers

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Contents

Introduction

Since her first poetry collection in 1981, Pattiann Rogers has built a reputation as one of America's most perceptive and thoughtful poets. Her works generally concern the natural world, with close observation of simple facts used to build the case for a higher order in the universe. This is certainly true of "The Greatest Grandeur," from Rogers's 1993 collection *Geocentric*. In this poem, Rogers explores a variety of things that people have considered the greatest grandeur, or sign of the universe's infinite wonder. With carefully chosen words and contrast of images, Rogers makes the magnificence of the natural world come alive on the page.

The examples that Rogers gives of candidates for the greatest grandeur in life range from the tiny electrons that surround an atom, to the raging seas, to the open sky itself. In the end, the poem suggests that the greatest grandeur of the universe is found in "the dark emptiness contained in every next moment." As with all of Rogers's poems, a religious reverence is felt, but she does not advocate any one religious system; instead, she finds an aspect of nature that includes most major religions.

"The Greatest Grandeur" is available in *Song of the World Becoming: New and Collected Poems, 1981-2001*, Rogers's collection of new and collected poems, published in 2001.

Author Biography

Pattiann Rogers was born on March 23, 1940, in Joplin, Missouri, to Irene C. and William Tall. Her family was relatively poor, supported by what money her father could make as an inventor. When she was twenty, she married John Robert Rogers. After earning a bachelor of arts degree in English literature from the University of Missouri in 1961, she worked as an English teacher to support him through graduate school. He became a geophysicist, providing a connection to science that can be seen throughout Rogers's poetry. After the birth of the couple's first son, Rogers stayed home to take care of him; another son soon followed. While her family always took first priority, it was while she was raising her children that Rogers developed her poetry career.

Rogers's first published book of poetry was *The Expectation of Light*, published in 1981, the same year that she received her master of arts degree from the University of Houston. Since then, she has published numerous volumes of poetry and essays and has been the recipient of several awards, including the Tietjens Prize and the Hokin Prize from *Poetry*, the Roethke Prize from *Poetry Northwest*, the Stroesse Award from *Prairie Schooner* (twice), and four Pushcart Prizes. She has also received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. Her works have appeared in more than fifty anthologies. She has been a faculty member of Vermont College and has been a visiting writer at the University of Montana, University of Arkansas, and University of Texas. Her collected papers from 1960 to 1999, including manuscript copies of her books, are archived at the University of Texas Library at Austin.

Rogers still publishes frequently and does readings of her works often. In 2001, she published *Song of the World Becoming: New and Selected Poems, 1981-2001*, which gives an overview of her career. She and her husband currently live in Colorado.

Poem Text

Some say it's in the reptilian dance
of the purple-tongued sand goanna,
for there the magnificent translation
of tenacity into bone and grace occurs.

And some declare it to be an expansive
desert□solid rust-orange rock
like dusk captured on earth in stone□
simply for the perfect contrast it provides
to the blue-grey ridge of rain
in the distant hills.

Some claim the harmonics of shifting
electron rings to be most rare and some
the complex motion of seven sandpipers
bisecting the arcs and pitches
of come and retreat over the mounting
hayfield.

Others, for grandeur, choose the terror
of lightning peals on prairies or the tall
collapsing cathedrals of stormy seas,
because there they feel dwarfed
and appropriately helpless; others select
the serenity of that ceiling/cellar
of stars they see at night on placid lakes,
because there they feel assured
and universally magnanimous.

But it is dark emptiness contained
in every next moment that seems to me
the most singularly glorious gift,
that void which one is free to fill
with processions of men bearing burning
cedar knots or with parades of blue horses,
belled and ribboned and stepping sideways,
with tumbling white-faced mimes or companies
of black-robed choristers; to fill simply
with hammered silver teapots or kiln-dried
crockery, tangerine and almond custards,
polonaises, polkas, whittling sticks, wailing
walls; that space large enough to hold all
invented blasphemies and pieties, 10,000

definitions of god and more, never fully filled, never.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

The first words of "The Greatest Grandeur" imply a discussion that has already been taking place: the subject of the discussion is only referred to as "it," and readers are disoriented until they realize that the poem is already in the process of identifying the "greatest grandeur" referred to in the title. Rogers opens the poem with the image of a goanna, which is another name for the sand monitor. This lizard, which resembles an iguana, stands on its hind legs when defending itself, presenting the odd sight of its long slim body and short legs, which are made for scurrying along the ground, though it is at times propped up in a vertical pose. The idea that such a homely creature or its awkward motion could be seen as the greatest thing in existence is unlikely. Still, the third and fourth lines of the poem make a case that the goanna's primitive structure and odd movements are signs of "tenacity," or sheer persistence, brought to life.

Lines 5-10

The poem's second stanza concentrates on one specific visual image, that of the contrast between the light color of the desert and the darkness of the hills that rise up in the distance. The desert is associated with rust in line 6, and in line seven it is called "dusk captured on earth in stone." In the same way that the first stanza imagines the lizard as being the living embodiment of tenacity, here it takes an event□dusk□and gives it a physical presence.

The second half of this stanza goes past capturing the simple visual effect of the desert to make a statement about grandeur. According to the theory put forth in line 8, grandeur is not in the stones of the desert or the hills, but in their contrast to one another. Rogers shows readers the contrast visually: the earlier description of "rust-orange rock" is balanced with "the blue-grey ridge of rain." Orange is held up against its opposite, grey; solid rock is compared to liquid rain; and the flatness of the "expansive" desert is opposed to the vertical hills.

Lines 11-16

The poem's third stanza offers two possible candidates for the title of "the greatest grandeur." The first is finished off in the first two lines, but it has strong implications for the organization of the social world. In referring to "electron rings," Rogers introduces an element that is too small to be experienced with the naked eye and so has to be observed through an electron microscope. This technology is relatively new, a creation of humanity's ongoing pursuit of science and a confirmation that, rather than deadening the human appetite for mystery and grandeur, science enhances it by presenting new wonders that would not even have been thought about a hundred years ago. The use of

the word "harmonics" in line 11 implies an artistic sense that is not usually associated with matters of hard science.

The rest of the stanza is spent painting a picture of observable nature. Sandpipers are shore birds, usually found near oceans. Flying in circles, they resemble the rings of electrons mentioned in line 12. Rather than directly drawing attention to this circular motion, the poem refers to it with the language of geometry: "bisecting," "arcs," and "pitches." The circular motion is further obscured when the poem describes it as "come and retreat." These simple command words are reminiscent of how one might speak to an animal, such as a dog, and they serve to remind readers of the birds' own narrow view of what they are doing. As with the case of the electron rings, the description of the sandpipers observes the relationship between science and nature. Whereas the earlier example described grandeur found in the course of scientific observation, the motion of the sandpipers describes a grand scene and then draws attention to the scientific elements within it.

Lines 17-21

The first line of the fourth stanza marks the first time that the concept of "grandeur" is actually named within the poem. It is mentioned in the title, but readers cannot always count on a poem's title to clearly identify what the piece is about. This stanza contrasts terror and serenity, focusing both emotions on events in the sky. Lines 17, 18, and 19 describe two similar phenomena: lightning on the prairie and waves crashing on the sea during a storm. Though they occur in locations that are distinctly different, the two have large, violent motion and loud sounds in common, making them both reasonable causes for terror. In describing the waves as "cathedrals of stormy seas," the poem once again draws a parallel between natural and human-made phenomena. Cathedrals are considered awe-inspiring because they are so large. Their construction was a feat that is especially impressive because they were built in a preindustrial age when large structures were rare. To see them crashing down would indeed be terrifying. Rogers compares each wave crash to such an event. In line 21, the poem uses the unusual phrase "appropriately helpless" to describe why some people feel that such events constitute the greatest grandeur. This indicates a human tendency toward self-effacement, since the people described in this line feel that it is correct that people should focus on their weaknesses.

Lines 22-25

By contrast, lines 22-25 describe the feeling of assurance that can be gotten from looking at the sky on a calm, starry night. The crashing waves are contrasted with the peaceful surface of a lake. If a person is looking up at the sky, it seems like a ceiling. But, if a person is looking at the stars as reflected in the lake, the sky then seems like a cellar. Viewing this situation does not make people feel hopeless but "magnanimous"□that is, courageous and generous.

Lines 26-29

The last stanza begins with what the speaker of the poem would choose as the greatest grandeur. Once again, it is phrased as a contrast: it is both "dark emptiness" and "the most singularly glorious gift." That gift is the unpredictability that occurs because of the passage of time. Though some might view emptiness as a frightening prospect, this poem presents it as an opportunity.

Lines 30-37

Lines 30 through 37 are filled with contrasting ways that people could make use of time. Like much of Rogers's work, this poem takes a fairly amoral stance: that is, the speaker is not concentrated on what should happen, but only on what could. The "processions" described in lines 30 and 31 are frightening because they imply ritualized violence, with people carrying torches, but then they are followed by a similar image of a nonthreatening parade of horses. Silly, clownish mimes are contrasted with serious chorus singers in black. Silver teapots are contrasted with stone pottery. Formal dances are contrasted with folk dances. The pastime of whittling is contrasted with the mournful grief of wailing.

Lines 38-41

The poem returns in the end to its amoral stance by noting that the greatest grandeur allows room for both blasphemies and pieties. Rogers is very specific about avoiding any claim that she might have the right sense of behavior and, instead, celebrates the fact that so many different behaviors and beliefs belong in this world because of the possibility that is presented by time. While any definition of God should be comprehensive, covering all things in reality, the poem states that reality is large enough to encompass ten thousand definitions of God "and more."

The last four words of this poem create a sort of geometrical pattern. The word "never" starts and finishes this phrase, and the two words in the middle are similar in sound, sharing both the initial "f" and the "l" sounds in the middles. This last phrase is bisected, for effect, by the line break.

Themes

Nature and Its Meaning

The main focus of "The Greatest Grandeur" is the ways in which humans use their observations of nature to lead to conclusions about religion. The poem gives examples of things that people think are signs that there is a divine order beyond what is obvious. These examples are all derived from nature. Some are traditional signs of godly order, such as the peaceful feeling caused by stars over a lake on a clear night or the intimidating violence of a rolling thunderstorm. Others are specifically modern examples, such as the motion of electrons around an atom. Some are as open as the desert, and others are as focused as the quirky motions of a tiny lizard. Whether they are frightening or comforting, intimidating or emboldening, the things of nature are allowed to speak for themselves in this poem. Each case shows that powerful emotions can come out of paying close attention to nature, and, in each case, the lesson learned is that nature is just an indicator of the grandeur of the universe.

The images used in the poem's last stanza are drawn from social interaction, not nature, but they still emphasize nature's influence. The most obvious of these is that the processions of men referred to in line 30 are not just said to be carrying torches but "burning cedar knots": attention is brought to bear on the natural source of the torches, right down to the type of trees they come from. Likewise, the rest of the stanza, though talking about articles made by humans, makes a point of mentioning that they are made of silver, crockery, tangerine and almonds and wood. The point seems to be that even when one finds grandeur in human achievement, one still must recognize that humans cannot stand apart from nature.

Divinity

Divinity is a word that is often used to describe godlike qualities or characteristics. In its title, this poem identifies the divine, although not necessarily any one concept of God, as its theme. Like "divinity," "grandeur" is a word that is often associated with God. A key point to this poem is that grandeur is elusive, meaning different things to different people at different times, but there are some awe-inspiring events that tend to put people in mind of the divine. Scenic vista, scientific complexity, the moods of nature, and the accomplishments of humanity are all indicators of grandeur, but the poem concludes that none of them is in itself complete. The single best indicator of God, according to this poem, is the "void" of the immediate next moment. This is the one thing that can contain all of the varied examples that it brings up, as well as the "10,000 definitions of god and more" that people have thought up. By recognizing the grandeur in so many different things and then finding that time contains all of those varied things, the poem is able to accept that people can see divinity in all things and that they still do not add up to grandeur.

Future

After examining all of the possibilities, this poem decides that the greatest thing about this universe is that there is more to come. This is not exactly an optimistic viewpoint, but it comes close to optimism in the way that it looks forward to the future. A purely optimistic viewpoint would state the assurance that the future will be good; "The Greatest Grandeur," however, does not take sides in the judgment of good and evil but, instead, rejoices that the future is big enough never to be filled.

Whereas the physical images that the poem offers are often broad in scope, the future offered here is described in terms of one moment after another. The poem is not interested in future hours, years, and centuries. The view that it takes is not one of judging future outcomes, just of appreciating the fact that future events begin, or can begin, at any moment. In much the same way that the poem shows equal respect toward events that are the opposite of each other, it also shows little regard for future events, focusing instead on the wonder of the fact that they can occur at all. To give this idea full impact, the poem places this hope at the end, preceding it with the wide range of things that have already come before, to stretch readers' beliefs about what is possible.

Style

Structure

Overall, "The Greatest Grandeur" does not have a very strict structure. There is no particular set length for each line, no standard rhyme scheme, and no consistency in the lengths of the stanzas. What it does do, though, is follow the structure of a logical argument. Each of the first four stanzas begins with a statement that tells readers that it is just putting forth some of the argument but not the whole thing. There is a temporary feeling to the statements "Some say" and "And some declare" and "Some claim" and "others," indicating that the poem is not willing to accept these standards, and in fact, it is not. The final stanza contains the interpretation of the greatest grandeur that the poet accepts, and it is presented as if it is the summary of the all of the ideas that were previously suggested.

Monologue

For the most part, this poem is told directly to the reader, with no personality given to the narrator. In the fifth stanza, it becomes apparent that there actually is, in fact, a specific person narrating these events. The second line of the last stanza ends with "seems to me," and that one two-letter word changes the position of the narrative voice with regard to the reader. When the narrator is not present, it is referred to as an "omniscient narrator"; a distinct voice might be identifiable, but the poem does not draw attention to it. In a case like this, the narrative is not considered omniscient but is speaking from one person's distinct point of view. The "me" of the poem is presumably the author, and the entire poem is read as a monologue by the author.

Alliteration

"The Greatest Grandeur" does not use rhymes at the ends of lines as many poems do, but it still takes advantage of similar sounds in the language to tie its ideas together. Instead of rhymes, which are words that have similar ending sounds, it uses alliteration, which is the repetition of similar initial consonant sounds. This can be found frequently throughout the poem, from the repeated *g* in "greatest grandeur" to the *t*'s of "translation of tenacity" to the *p*'s in "the perfect contrast it provides" to the *g*'s in "glorious gift." This technique helps to make the poem, which is written in free verse, feel more measured, more structured, giving readers a better sense of the author's controlling hand.

Historical Context

Rogers first published "The Greatest Grandeur" in 1993. The poem, like most of her poetry, represents an attempt to transcend traditional religious views, to look at the natural world and find in it guides that can help one attain spirituality. At the time that this poem was published, the search for spirituality outside the tenants of traditional religions was on the rise as a commercial force in American society. This social phenomenon, which reached its peak in the mid-1990s, was broadly referred to as the New Age movement.

It is difficult to define the New Age movement with any precision. For one thing, its origins are uncertain. Some people relate its rise to the spiritual void left by 1960s counterculture skepticism, while others cite anxiety about the coming millennium as being the main force. Another problem in defining it is that, like most social movements, the term was used by different people for different things, with many serving their own interests. In the end, the fact that the term has fallen out of use is not as much an indicator of changing religious beliefs as it is of the overwhelming mockery that was visited on its adherents. New Age philosophies have gone on to survive under other names, whereas the term "New Age" has turned into little more than a comic punchline.

The defining factors of New Age philosophy are an inquisitiveness about other world religious experiences and a desire to find religious experience through science and nature. Often, New Age followers were people who had found themselves unable to derive a meaningful experience from mainstream Christianity or Judaism and had turned their curiosity to Eastern religions, such as Hindu mysticism and Tibetan Buddhism. Rather than becoming converts to these faiths, they adapted various practices from them, creating an independent religion with each person's particular mixture. For instance, transcendental meditation, a derivative of Hindu beliefs, was a fad in the 1970s and became a precursor to the New Age movement. Chanting was another common practice that was derived from several different non-Western religions. Obscure beliefs of lesser-known cultures, such as the Bushmen of the Kalahari and the Guaani of South America, were introduced to American audiences. According to a 1994 Roper poll, 45 percent of all respondents said that meditating gave them the feeling that they were in the presence of something sacred. Cynics dismissed the use of selective aspects of other religions as a sign that New Agers were indulging in superficial curiosity, rather than in true religious experience.

Another aspect of New Age culture was the use of methods that sounded scientific but rejected the findings of traditional science. Shamanism, herbalism, reflexology, aromatherapy, and aura reading all were explored as methods to deal with human troubles that ranged from nervousness to serious diseases. One particularly popular New Age form of science was the belief in the healing power of crystals, which were treated as cures, as good luck talismans, and as icons as powerful as religious icons had been considered by traditional religions.

At the more mystical extremes of the New Age movement was the belief in communication with other forms of life, either from the realm of the dead or from one's own past experiences. The resurgence of belief in reincarnation during the 1990s is attributed, in large part, to the writings of Shirley MacLaine, the famous actress whose five books throughout the 1980s sold more than eight million copies and spun off to a five-hour miniseries in 1987 about her spiritual awakening. The hope or belief that one can contact those who have died is a persistent belief that has shown itself throughout history, back to the Oracle of Delphi in ancient Greece. The last time that mediums for contacting the spirits of the departed were this popular with mainstream Americans was at the end of the nineteenth century, nearly a hundred years earlier, when the Theosophical Society, formed by the famed Russian spiritualist Madame Blavatsky, attracted members of high society with such traditional carnival tricks as levitating tables and "spirits" knocking on walls.

The term "New Age" quickly fell from use by the end of the 1990s. Cynics mocked its adherents for being zealous about alternatives to traditional science and religion that they did not even fully understand. It became increasingly harder to accept New Age beliefs after considering the greed factor: fortunes could be made by mediocre musicians, by healers with worthless herbs and rocks, and by mediums who adapted phony tricks, if they packaged their products as alternative spiritual beliefs. The caricature of the New Age zealot, chanting and babbling about various poorly understood religious concepts, only to be cheerfully swindled, became society's norm. Though the New Age movement began from many of the same curious impulses that make "The Greatest Grandeur" a powerful poem, its adherents took their curiosity too far, molding their own religions out of their rejection of other religions.

Critical Overview

In a short time since the 1981 publication of her first book, *The Expectations of Light*, Rogers's name has become practically synonymous with poetry that gracefully appreciates the modern scientific view. For instance, in a 1994 review discussing a book in which "God's Grandeur" appeared, *Publishers Weekly* noted that her poems "strongarm us with poetic gymnastics, blending scientific theory with luscious poetic rhythms." More recently, Rose Marie Berger, an assistant editor at *Sojourners*, noted in a 2001 review that over the course of six poetry collections "Rogers builds a word-bridge between the highly specialized scientific mind and the human heart." Berger draws attention to the fact that "In the world of literary academia, Rogers is known for her vast knowledge of natural science and physics."

Rogers's reputation for combining science with poetry is not just limited to the relatively small world of academic writing. Pamela Miller, writin in the "Entertainment" section of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, brought the poet to the attention of a wider and more general audience in an article about National Poetry Month in 2001. According to her, Rogers's "layered, lyrical work is a brilliant wedding of science and faith and a celebration of their offspring, mystery." Rogers is so well known for bringing science into contemporary poetry that her peers can refer to this trait casually, as Thomas M. Disch did when, reviewing a book by another writer, he mentioned in passing that a character created by C. K. Williams "is one among literally hundreds of characters whom he has imagined as intensely as Pattiann Rogers imagined her redspotted toads."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, Kelly questions Rogers's reputation for finding religion in nature, concluding that, in this poem at least, she finds religious experience only by going outside of the natural world.

Pattiann Rogers is a poet with a reputation for using observations of the natural world to tie together science and religion, two fields of inquiry that often are found to be contradictory. Her ability to see the world clearly and capture it in words is clear, as is her skill at raising questions. What is not so clear, however, is the assumption that vividly rendering the physical world and approaching it with a religious attitude can necessarily produce poetry that finds religion in the world. In fact, an examination of one particular poem, "The Greatest Grandeur," makes this connection less than certain. Reading this poem carefully and observing how it works, one is led to the conclusion that Rogers is not finding religious grandeur in the things of the world, but in spite of them.

The theory that a poem like "The Greatest Grandeur" links the physical world with God comes from its close, reverent observations of the things of nature and the things of humanity. But, the poem is a description, not an explanation, of the world. In terms of how or why things are the way they are, it actually does the opposite of explaining. It tears down familiar understandings, reducing them to hearsay. The reason that this is not obvious is that Rogers's tone resembles that of actual inquiry. The poem makes quite a few strong cases for the idea that heavenly grandeur can be found here on Earth, among the things that one can experience. In the end, though, all of these various cases are dismissed, and the "greatest grandeur" is found to be something that is not actually here, something that is not attainable, a phantom that can never be known. All things are said to have grandeur, but the poem does not find greatness in any of them. The greatest grandeur is found to be in the eternal void, "the dark emptiness contained in every next moment."

One reason that readers and critics tend to think of Rogers's work as finding religion through science is that she has a way of presenting a poem such as "The Greatest Grandeur" in a style that resembles a logical syllogism or mathematical equation, but it is actually more a declaration. It has elements of an equation to it, if one accepts without thinking about it that "Some say," "And some declare," "Some claim," and "Others" will total up to the conclusion that is reached in the final stanza. Despite a superficial resemblance to mounting evidence, though, there is no string of causality running through the poem. The poem is not claiming that the dark emptiness it reaches in its conclusion occurs *because* of all of the examples previously presented as evidence, but *in spite of* them.

The poem is structured, in fact, like the Declaration of Independence. That document begins by addressing a situation already in progress with "When in the course of human events," and "The Greatest Grandeur" starts with "Some say." The Declaration of Independence goes on to list one charge against the king of England in much the same

way that Rogers goes on to list one piece of evidence after another of the divine presence in the natural world. The Declaration of Independence and the poem both draw their own conclusions in the final paragraph. The major difference is that the Declaration of Independence is a list of outrages that are meant to stir up strong negative emotions, convincing readers that the various acts it describes are intolerable. The poem, on the other hand, makes each of the scenarios that it examines as a candidate for the greatest grandeur seem quite reasonable.

Rogers makes each alternate choice seem as compelling as it can be. One way that she does this is through the use of vivid details, to let readers tap into what memories they might have in order to experience what might be the greatest grandeur. The objects that she chooses are rendered in detail, and they each represent a wider category that people have considered in the eons-long quest for godliness. Representing the animal world is the ancient, complex goanna, which is obscure to most American readers and the sandpipers, whose flight could seem like random soaring until it is expressed, as it is in the poem, in mathematical terms. Representing landscapes is the vast, mysterious desert. Atomic rings represent the considerable parts of the world that are only experienced through scientific exploration; a violent storm at sea stands for all that is intimidating in nature; stars above a calm lake symbolize all that makes humans comfortable. In each case, Rogers provides specific details, but whole areas of philosophy are implied. Things like the goanna's purple tongue, the distant hills beyond the desert, or the hay fields that (specifically) seven sandpipers circle, could be found to limit an image to one unique occurrence, but instead they serve to make these specific details universal. Each possible "greatest grandeur" is presented in its best possible case, making each at least seem to be conceivably the grandest. As with the poem's structure, Rogers does not contrast her own chosen candidate, the dark emptiness, with weak opposition but instead makes each of the alternatives plausible.

The poem's language, like its structure and imagery, presents a fair case that grandeur can be found in the physical world. At the very least, it gives as much craft to the idea of grandeur found in nature as it does to its preferred solution to this question, that grandeur is found in the intangible idea of time's passing. Descriptions, already intelligently rendered, are tied together throughout the poem with the poetic device of alliteration, as strings of words start with similar sounds and then keep those sounds repeating. For example, the goanna's tenacity is not only told about, but the punches of the hard *t* sound in "translation into tenacity" drive the concept home. Likewise, with the rolling, liquid *r*'s in "ridge of rain," the contrast to the desert's dry heat, and the airy, sibilant *s* that snakes its way through "seven sandpipers" and onto the next line, with "bisecting," "arcs," and "pitches." This technique continues into the final stanza, where the poem piles up more and more things that do not qualify for the title of "greatest grandeur" because they are too much of the earth. Repeating sounds does give readers a feeling of the weight and substance of the things being discussed, but that weight and substance are exactly what prevent each of these things from earning the title "greatest." The poem only breaks from its smooth style in the last line, an abrupt end that indicates the incompleteness of experience and leaves readers unfulfilled.

This is not a poem about what is, but rather about what is not. As specific as the images that it uses, as clearly rendered and poetically woven together as they are, the poem's ultimate goal is to dismiss all of reality, finding nothing of this world worthy of the title "greatest grandeur." Rogers uses the physical world to make her point that grandeur can be found in an imagined world. She plays ideas about nature against each other, eliminating each other until all that is left is the supernatural. This is why so many aspects of

"The Greatest Grandeur" cancel each other out. Bright, dry desert is contrasted with dark, rainy hills; bone is contrasted with grace; electron rings with birds' swoops; dread is given equal balance against serenity. Overall, the aspects of nature that dominate the first four stanzas are balanced against human concepts presented in the fifth. If no aspects of earthly reality can be found more significant than their opposites, then a stalemate is reached. The greatest grandeur must then be that which does not exist. The poem could go for pure idealism but instead stays near the area of reality, declaring that greatness is found in things that will come into being, even though there is no proof that they are going to. The greatest grandeur is potential. This is not a new philosophical position. It is the basis of existentialism, which rejects the past in favor of what is to come, and in particular the Christian existentialism of Kierkegaard, which made the choices of every next moment the basis for recognizing humans' ethical responsibility. In her essay "Twentieth-Century Cosmology and the Soul's Habitation,"which is about the place of the spirit in the modern human understanding of the physical world, Rogers found the two contradictory: "Any effort to investigate the universe," she wrote, "whether through science or literature, involves making a cut in the universe, interrupting its wholeness and unity, and therefore disrupting and ignoring the interconnectedness of all things." Even by her own reckoning, there is no real way to combine the physical world with a human understanding of the physical world. This is no reason to quit trying, and it is not to say that anyone can do it better than Rogers: all that it says is that it is inaccurate to say that her poetry finds religion within nature.

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

Critical Essay #2

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill examines Rogers's method of using lists to enrich both the language and meaning of her work, as evidenced in this poem.

The simplest, most efficient way to saturate a poem with crisp, vivid imagery is to fill it with lists of concrete objects, aptly modified, of course, with good adjectives. Pattiann Rogers is a master of this technique, and she explains why it appeals to her in a 2002 interview with staff writer Alice R. O'- Grady of the *Chautauquan Daily*: "You can tell from my poems I love lists. Walt Whitman did, too. I had somebody tell me once—and I think it's true—when you start a list, it doesn't matter what it's of, it turns out to be a celebration, an affirmation." As the title suggests, Rogers's poem "The Greatest Grandeur" is replete with celebration and affirmation, made so because the poet stuffed it chock-full of descriptive nouns, adjectives, and verbs, fired-off in lists from start to finish. While many poems falter in the overkill of such relentless imagery, this one succeeds because of the *connections* within the lists—the reasonable and appealing transitions from one image to the next that save the poem from hodgepodge and discord.

The first stanza suggests the importance of connections in describing the "magnificent translation" of the goanna's lumbering lizard body into the gracefulness of a "reptilian dance." One does not need to be familiar with the large Australian lizard, or even to have ever heard its name, to picture the action taking place in this first item on the list. The phrases "reptilian dance," "purpletongued," and "tenacity into bone and grace" are enough to bring the scene to life and to convey the grandeur of a wild animal in its natural environment. From the lizard in nature to the environment itself, the poem shifts to its second item, now describing "an expansive desert" with the same lush language that animated the goanna. The desert is "solid rust-orange rock," but Rogers does not stop there; instead, she draws a link between the tangible and the intangible—the tangible desert is "like [intangible] dusk captured on earth in stone." The transition here is splendid, setting up the next shift, this time to the "blue-grey ridge of rain" that provides a colorful contrast to the orange desert. While one usually thinks of hot, dry sand as the polar opposite of rainy weather, the seeming contradiction works here because the parts are held together with *colorful* images. Once again, the connection is made through explicit visual stimulation.

Sight is not the only sense that gets activated by this poem, for one cannot see "the harmonics of shifting / electron rings"—at least not until they are imitated in the "complex motion of seven sandpipers / bisecting the arcs and pitches" of coming and going in the invisible air. Obviously, electron rings and birds are unlikely pairs on a list, but when readers understand that the movement of one is reflected in the movement of the other, the link is not only reasonable but fascinating. So too is the easy blend of things that make one "feel dwarfed / and . . . helpless" and things that make one feel "assured / and . . . magnanimous." The sense of hearing is stimulated with this part of the list, from

"lightning peals on prairies" and "collapsing cathedrals of stormy seas" to the "serenity . . . / of stars" and "placid lakes." Grandeur, it seems, knows no specific category of definition, embracing opposing thoughts and things as much as those that naturally complement one another.

When the speaker in the poem finally gets around to proclaiming her own definition of grandeur, she supports it with ever-increasing lists to provide concrete examples of her interpretation. Finding magnificence in the "dark emptiness" of "every next moment" may seem a dubious glory until she explains that the grandeur comes about in the freedom to fill the void of time with whatever one chooses□from "men bearing burning / cedar knots" to "10,000 / definitions of god" and everything in between. Those middle items mentioned are worth taking a close look at because they drive home the importance of lists with strong descriptors and good connections. The vivid scenes portrayed with "parades of blue horses, belled and ribboned," "tumbling white-faced mimes," and "black-robed choristers" make for effective poetics on their own, but the seeming disparate items are actually linked, again, by colors□blue, white, and black□and by the fact that each describes a type of entertainment. The next possible voidfillers shift from drink and food containers□"silver teapots or kiln-dried / crockery"□to food itself□tangerine and almond custards." But, the items that follow present an interesting twist in this roster of examples, now presented with rapid-fire speed. After all, what does almond custard have to do with "polonaises" and "polkas," and what do Polish dances have to do with "whittling sticks" and "wailing walls?" At this point, it is safe to say *nothing* because at *this* point the poem does not need it.

When a poet has established an unmistakable and vibrant pattern of style or theme in a single work, he or she can usually get away with a little dabbling outside the mold by the end. In "The Greatest Grandeur," Rogers is consistent throughout nearly the entire poem in making believable connections among the otherwise variant places, things, and events she uses as subjects. So, in the last few lines, if the links present a greater challenge or if they are nonexistent, there is still no loss in the work's meaning or strength. In fact, this poem's overall presentation is actually enhanced by the sudden string of dissimilar images that draw it to an apt conclusion: the void of the next moment is "never fully / filled, never." The quickness of movement from polonaises to polkas to whittling sticks to wailing walls and, finally, to blasphemies, pieties, and definitions of god suggests an urgency to name as many ways to fill the "dark emptiness" as possible□all the while recognizing that the list of possibilities is endless.

The final three items mentioned in the speaker's list of what grandeur means are obviously much different from the very visual objects that precede them. Cedar knots, horses, teapots, custard, sticks, and walls may all have properties of visibility and other physical senses, but they are overshadowed by the immensity of "all / invented blasphemies and pieties, 10,000 / definitions of god and more." The shift to such abstract, unobservable items does not deter the list's cohesiveness; rather, it serves to show the accelerating, never-ending progression of the definitions of grandeur. It attempts to portray the entire scope of possibilities□while one man's grandeur is a parade of horses, another's is devotion and faith; while one woman finds magnificence in the voices of a choir, another finds it in contemplating God. As the poem's final

thought makes so clear, regardless of what one chooses to fill his or her next moment with, there will always be something different to fill the next.

It is certainly true that a poet could use fewer words and fewer visual examples to describe the profusion of life's grandeur. Consider the powerful imagery of William Carlos Williams's tiny masterpiece, "The Red Wheelbarrow," which contains only sixteen words. In this short poem, Williams defines the grace, beauty, and grandeur of nature, of rural living, and of simplicity itself. This muchanthologized poem uses only one image yet still evokes the same sense of awe and the same crisp vividness as "The Greatest Grandeur," which uses more than a dozen. Still, it is not necessary to try to make a case for one over the other because the only real difference is quantity, not quality. Rogers simply prefers the bond created through making intriguing connections and, as she notes in the *Chautauquan Daily* interview, through lists that become a celebration and an affirmation of whatever subjects they involve. In the end, she shows how many topics can really be just one□even if their individual premises are as varied as a dancing, purpletongued goanna and a sky full of stars reflecting off a peaceful lake.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "The Greatest Grandeur," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Adaptations

A compact disc of Pattiann Rogers reading twenty-one of her poems from her book *Song of the World Becoming: New and Collected Poems, 1981-2001* was recently recorded and is available by emailing pattiann_rogers@mindspring. com

The author's own web page, "The Poetry World of Pattiann Rogers," can be found at http://www .mindspring.com/~pattiann_rogers and includes links to upcoming readings and publications with which the author will be involved.

Pattiann Rogers reading her poetry is available on a ninety-minute audiocassette from the radio program *New Letters on the Air* (1994), produced by the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

A video of Rogers reading her poetry in 1993, the year that "The Greatest Grandeur" was published, and talking with Michael Silverblatt is available from the Lannan Video Series. It is distributed by Small Press Distribution, Inc., of Berkeley, California.

Rogers is one of several poets on the 1998 video recording *Why We Write*. Filmed at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival in 1997, this tape includes a discussion about the role of women in poetry. It is distributed by Films for the Humanities.

The Cortland Review online literary magazine has posted a feature at http://www.cortlandreview .com/features/99/10/rogers.htm that features "A Day in the Life of Pattiann Rogers," written by the poet in 1999.

Topics for Further Study

Research the peculiar habits of the goanna, and write a detailed description of its defensive dance, which the poem describes as graceful.

he end of the poem mentions "10,000 definitions of god and more." Research different religions, and make a list of ten or more such images of God.

Examine some animal or some natural phenomenon in depth, and explain to your class the truly awe-inspiring things about it that are not apparent to the naked eye.

Assign members of your class to groups to debate which is the greatest grandeur: snow, rain, or sunshine.

What Do I Read Next?

An overview of Pattiann Rogers's career can be found in *Song of the World Becoming: New and Collected Poems, 1981-2001*, published by Milkweed Editions in 2001.

The poem "God's Grandeur" was likely an influence on "The Greatest Grandeur." Written by Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Catholic poet and Jesuit priest, the former poem is available in almost any collection of Hopkins's poetry, including the current Dover Thrift Edition named *"God's Grandeur" and Other Poems*, published in 1995.

Rogers is included with other poets who examine nature, such as A. R. Ammons, Thomas Lux, and Jorie Graham, in *Verse & Universe: Poems about Science and Mathematics* (1998), edited by Kurt Brown.

Nineteenth-century essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson is considered to be a key figure in American transcendentalism, a philosophic and literary movement that examined how all things in nature reflected the general course of the universe. His most influential work is available in Modern Library's *The Essential Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (2000).

Further Study

Guillen, Michael, *Five Equations That Changed the World: The Power and Poetry of Mathematics*, Hyperion Press, 1996.

Guillen examines the subject of math from an artistic standpoint, bringing out the beauty embedded in such equations as Newton's universal law of gravitation and Faraday's law that connects electricity to magnetism.

Irmscher, Christopher, *The Poetics of Natural History: From James Bartram to William James*, Rutgers University Press, 1999.

Irmscher traces the historical development of naturalists in American history from 1730 to 1868. This is well before Rogers's time but provides an interesting context.

Midgley, Mary, *Science and Poetry*, Routledge, 2001.

The point of English philosopher Midgley's book is that science and poetry share the same goals but are too often isolated from one another.

Williams, M. L., "Knowers and Makers: Describing the Universe," in *The Measured Word: On Poetry and Science*, edited by Kurt Brown, University of Georgia Press, 2001, pp. 14-23.

This essay and other essays in this collection examine the relationship between scientific inquiry and artistic inspiration, looking at the ways in which the two are dependent on each other.

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Miller, Pamela, "Poetry: From Layered and Lyrical to Short and Surreal," in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, April 22, 2001, p. 14F.

O'Grady, Alice R., "Rogers Reads Poems about Nature, the Two Immensities, a Mouse and God," in the *Chautauquan Daily*, The Chautauquan Institute, 2002, http://www.ciweb. org/daily_rogers.html (last accessed January 2003).

Review of *Firekeeper: New and Selected Poems*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 241, No. 35, August 29, 1994, p. 68.

Rogers, Pattiann, *Song of the World Becoming: New and Collected Poems, 1981-2001*, Milkweed Editions, April 2001.

□, "Twentieth-Century Cosmology and the Soul's Habitation," in *The Measured Word: On Poetry and Science*, edited by Kurt Brown, University of Georgia Press, 2001, p. 11.

BOOKRAGS

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Project Editor
David Galens

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Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535