Hum Study Guide

Hum by Ann Lauterbach

Contents

Introduction

□Hum□ is the title work of Ann Lauterbach's 2005 poetry collection published by Penguin. The poem is deceptively simple; it is composed of short lines, everyday words, and seemingly innocuous images of the sky and weather. Through its circuitous framework and tangible sense of bewilderment, however, □Hum□ presents a visceral eyewitness reaction to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, on the World Trade Center, in New York City, where Lauterbach then lived and worked.

The poem is composed of twenty-seven couplets, or two-line stanzas, full of repeated words and phrases. □Beautiful,□ □tomorrow,□ □weep,□ □weather,□ □yesterday,□ and □here□ are all echoed multiple times, giving the poem a tone of sorrow and a theme of temporal dislocation. □Hum□ is written in free-verse style, meaning that its lines do not rhyme and do not have a consistent meter, or rhythm. In a postmodernist style, the images and phrases are fragmentary and often not meant to be taken literally. In a work such as this, the poet relies on the reader to fill in details based on his or her own experiences.

Lauterbach is often considered a member of the New York School of poets, a loose-knit group working primarily in Manhattan after 1950, whose work is influenced by the visual arts, especially abstract expressionism. This group includes such poets as John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, and James Schuyler, and their work is often as much about the process of writing as about the result. Like many abstract expressionist paintings, whose meanings can be difficult to decipher on the basis of their titles and images alone, □Hum□ does not refer to the tragedy of the terrorist attacks directly, nor does it seek to explain or even mention the □hum□ of the title.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1942

Ann Lauterbach was born on September 28, 1942, in New York City. Both of her parents were active in leftist politics. Her father was a reporter for *Life* magazine and head of the Moscow bureau of *Time* magazine during World War II. He died of polio when Lauterbach was eight, after which her mother retreated into alcoholism. These early events profoundly affected Lauterbach; she came to see poetry and art as ways of lending meaning to her life and connecting with other people. Toward that end, she attended the High School of Music and Art in New York City, from which she graduated in 1960. After earning an English degree from the University of Wisconsin and spending a year as a graduate student at Columbia University, she moved to London, where she immersed herself in the vibrant art scene of the late 1960s. There, her crowning triumph was organizing a poetry conference featuring John Ashbery, who even then was considered a titan of the poetry world, as the keynote speaker. Lauterbach credits Ashbery as being a major influence on her work.

After seven years in England, Lauterbach returned to the United States in 1974 and worked at a series of art galleries in New York's up-and-coming Soho district. In those days, artists, poets, and musicians populated the same countercultural milieu. Lauterbach's poetry was especially influenced by visual artists, particularly the abstract expressionists, whose nonrepresentational paintings often became the inspiration for her poems. In 1979, she published her first significant book of poetry, *Many Times, but Then*, which was well received by critics.

In addition to three residencies at the prestigious Yaddo writers' community in the 1980s, Lauterbach also received a Guggenheim Fellowship and grants from the Ingram Merrill Foundation and the New York State Council for the Arts. In 1989, she became the Theodore Goodman Professor of Creative Writing at City College at the City University of New York, and in 1993 she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. Her other poetry collections include *Sacred Weather* (1984), *Before Recollection* (1987), *Clamor* (1991), and *On a Stair* (1997). In 2005, she published *The Night Sky: Writings on the Poetics of Experience*, a collection of essays on contemporary poetry that she wrote in the late 1990s for the *American Poetry Review*. The same year, she also published *Hum*, a collection of poems inspired by art, music, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which a critic for *Publishers Weekly* said reads like □a chorus of angels.□

Plot Summary

Lines 1-18

The first line of the poem, □The days are beautiful,□ is immediately repeated as the second line□and, in fact, the line appears a total of nine times; five of those repetitions come within the first fourteen lines. This type of repetition is called *anaphora* and usually serves to underscore a point the narrator wants to make. In the most literal sense, □The days are beautiful□ could refer to the weather in New York on September 11, 2001, which was unusually warm and sunny.

In the second stanza, the narrator's framework becomes circuitous. She states, □I know what days are,□ perhaps calling the word □beautiful□ to the mind of the reader, but then states, □The other is weather,□ and the reader is given no clue as to what □the other□ is referring. At this point, the reader is required to bring his or her own imagination into the poem. Also, the third line, □I know what days are,□ sets up another anaphoric parallel, with the fifth line, □I know what weather is.□

The fourth stanza introduces new words and images: □Things are incidental. / Someone is weeping.□ □Things,□ like □other,□ is entirely nonspecific and represents another opportunity for the reader to overlay his or her own ideas onto the poem. Similarly, the reader is not told who is weeping. As such, the precise □things□ and □someone□ may be seen as of secondary importance. The next line, on the other hand, reveals that the narrator is herself weeping □for the incidental.□ Then, the first line of the poem is repeated.

The sixth stanza introduces the theme of time with the question, □Where is tomorrow?□ The next line is, □Everyone will weep.□ Thus, in three successive stanzas the narrator has related that someone is weeping, she herself is weeping, and everyone will be weeping. That is, the act of weeping is to a certain extent universal. The seventh and eighth stanzas begin with the same line: □Tomorrow was yesterday.□ Here, the narrator sustains her puzzlelike framework with even more anaphora. In the eighth stanza, in fact, the narrator refers to yesterday, tomorrow, and today, deepening the focus on shifting perceptions of time. With the ninth stanza, □The sound of the weather / is everyone weeping□□the first stanza in which the two lines of the couplet constitute a single sentence□the previously introduced ideas and sorrowful tone of the poem are more firmly established.

Lines 19-38

The universality of the unnamed cause of the weeping is indicated in the tenth stanza: □Everyone is incidental. / Everyone weeps.□ The first of those lines could be literally understood to mean that every individual is subject to the forces of chance, while the second may indicate that these forces can cause great sadness. The next stanza

returns to the issue of passing time, asserting that today's tears will extinguish tomorrow, conveying a certain hopelessness.

The twelfth stanza returns to weather imagery: ⬜The rain is ashes. / The days are beautiful.⬜ The two lines create a dissonant image. Raining ashes would seem to be at odds with beautiful days. With the next lines, ⬜The rain falls down. / The sound is falling,⬜ the imagery becomes more complex. Rain, ashes, and sound are all falling. More ominously, line 27 states, ⬜The sky is a cloud.⬜ Together, these lines create an image of a cloud filled with rain, ashes, and sound. The narrator then becomes more specific, stating in line 29, ⬜The sky is dust.⬜ The image of a sky filled with dust, ashes, rain, and the sound of mass weeping undoubtedly stirs negative feelings in the reader. The narrator, meanwhile, still refrains from directly naming what she sees, instead presenting only fragmentary images.

Lines 30 and 31 are the same: ⬜The weather is yesterday.⬜ This is something of an inversion of line 16, ⬜Today is weather.⬜ Line 32 returns to the sound of weeping, briefly, before the narrator asks her second question in line 33, as if underscoring a certain confusion: ⬜What is this dust?⬜ Stanza 18 provides the first concrete clue to the subject of the poem: ⬜The days are beautiful. / The towers are yesterday.⬜ That second line may be read as another way of stating that the towers, which are given no physical description, no longer exist.

The narrator then declares in line 37, ⬜The towers are incidental,⬜ harking back to lines 7 and 19, in which ⬜things⬜ and ⬜everyone⬜ are also described as incidental, and line 9, ⬜I weep for the incidental.⬜ The next line is another question, a companion to line 33: ⬜What are these ashes?⬜ The repetition of the words ⬜ashes⬜ and ⬜dust⬜ is reminiscent of the common incantation of Christian burial rites, as written in the Book of Common Prayer, ⬜ashes to ashes, dust to dust,⬜ which in turn was inspired by Genesis 3:19: ⬜Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return.⬜ As such, the notion of death, not explicitly mentioned, may also be called to mind.

Lines 39-54

In the last section of the poem, the narrator abruptly switches focus. Gone is concern with time, as the words ⬜yesterday,⬜ ⬜today,⬜ and ⬜tomorrow⬜ do not again appear. Instead, each stanza, in a continuation of the poem's reliance on anaphora for dramatic effect, begins with the word ⬜here.⬜ These last eight stanzas present a catalog of images that are abstract and expressionist in their randomness. The narrator speaks of a robe, books, and stones, and in the context of the poem, all of these objects have undergone some transformation, even as they are still ⬜here.⬜ The words are ⬜retired to their books,⬜ while the stones are ⬜loosed from their settings.⬜

The last three stanzas present three final ambiguous images. ⬜Here is the place / where the sun came up⬜ gives particular importance to the sun's coming up on one particular occasion in one particular place. Stanza 26, ⬜Here is a season / dry in the fireplace,⬜ implies the burning up of an entire season. In view of earlier references, the

final lines call to mind burning and death on the one hand, light and beauty on the other: □Here are the ashes. / The days are beautiful.□

Themes

Passage of Time

Lauterbach's repetition of the words □yesterday,□ □today,□ and □tomorrow□ make the passage of time a major theme in □Hum.□ The puzzlelike framework in which the terms are placed underscores the sense of dislocation the narrator must be feeling. At various points, she states, □Tomorrow was yesterday□ and □The towers are yesterday.□ The first statement implies that the day before had been a fateful □tomorrow□□a day whose events had been long in coming. Yesterday, also, the towers existed. Yesterday things were different and perhaps more hopeful. Furthermore, □The tears of today / will put out tomorrow.□ That is, the future that once existed for many□including those who perished in the September 11 terrorist attacks as well as their family and friends□has been replaced by grief. Also, the statement □Today is weather□ is something of a neutral revision of the repeated statement □The days are beautiful.□ The sense of beauty has been replaced by the valueless term □weather.□ In effect, yesterday held hope, today holds only weeping, and tomorrow has been extinguished.

Air and Sky

Many of the narrator's words in □Hum□ relate either directly or indirectly to the air and sky. The word □weather□ itself appears seven times; also appearing multiple times are the words □rain,□ □sky,□ and □cloud.□ Lauterbach states directly that the weather is, variously, □other,□ □today,□ □the sound of . . . weeping,□ □yesterday,□ and □nothing.□ The □towers□ themselves indirectly reference air and sky; the World Trade Center's twin towers, at 110 stories each, were the tallest buildings in the world when they opened in 1973. They were an integral part of the New York skyline, visible from myriad locations both inside and outside Manhattan. Through the narrator's free association of ideas, the reader gets the sense that the towers were in fact part of the sky. The ominous sense of tragedy in □Hum□ comes, in part, from the narrator's observations that sounds, ashes, and dust are all falling from the sky.

Beauty

□The days are beautiful□ is one of the most enigmatic lines of □Hum,□ in addition to being its most frequent, appearing as both the first and last lines and seven other times in between. Its juxtaposition with the foreboding images of ashes, dust, and the sounds of everyone weeping create a stark discordance, which further results in a mood of a world off-kilter and out of synchronization. The narrator seems to be in a state of incomprehension, as if she cannot make sense of what is happening. Her insistence that □the days are beautiful,□ which is reinforced by her declaration □I know what days are,□ is upended by the sounds of weeping. The narrator herself is weeping □for the

incidental,☐ which, though unstated, might refer to the beautiful days; beauty is as fleeting and elusive as time in ☐Hum.☐

Disintegration

☐Ashes☐ and ☐dust,☐ by definition, conjure images of disintegration. The falling rain, the falling sound, and the statement that ☐the towers are yesterday☐ all further contribute to that theme. ☐The sky is dust☐ and ☐Here are the ashes,☐ along with the narrator's concern with weeping, tears, and the loss of tomorrow, indicate that the disintegration is both physical and metaphorical.

Lamentation

A *lamentation* is a song or poem expressing sorrow over a loss, particularly the death of a loved one. Although Lauterbach does not directly address the loss of any one person, her choice of words and the concatenation of images lend to the eulogizing effects of the poem. The narrator mentions that she weeps and that ☐everyone will weep.☐ She weeps, in particular, for the incidental, which, as defined in the poem, includes ☐things,☐ ☐everyone,☐ and ☐the towers.☐

The narrator's use of the words ☐ashes☐ and ☐dust☐ in the questions, ☐What is this dust?☐ and ☐What are these ashes?☐ indicate her incomprehension of the tragedy. Those familiar with the images of the World Trade Center's collapse will recognize Lauterbach's words as literal; the sky over Manhattan was indeed filled with ash and debris for days, as the rubble smoldered in the aftermath of the attacks. As a lamentation, the terms bring to mind the words of the Christian burial rite, as written in the Book of Common Prayer: ☐earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.☐ These words conjure images of solemn ceremony and the memorializing of the dead. Many of those who died in the World Trade Center literally became the dust and ashes that fell from the sky.

Style

Abstract Imagery

Abstract imagery is a literary device favored by the New York School of poets, who, again, were influenced by the visual arts, especially the abstract expressionism of such artists as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Their poems incorporate fragmentary, or incomplete, images to achieve a □painterly□ style. Indeed, with their phrases and disparate words, they emulate the way artists can use color and brushstrokes, rather than representational depictions of objects, to evoke meaning. *Abstract* images are those that do not overtly appear to make sense or relate to the subject at hand. □Here is the robe / that smells of the night□ presents such an image in □Hum.□ These words have little apparent relation to the poem's topic and represent an invitation for readers to bring their own ideas and interpretations to a work. In such a way, the artist creates a sort of dialogue between the poet and the reader. By using cryptic language and nonlinear frameworks, Lauterbach, like many other poets of the New York School, seeks to actively engage readers in endowing her poems with meaning.

Language Poetry

Language poetry, sometimes written as □L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E□ poetry, in reference to the magazine that bore that name, evolved in the 1970s, when many poets became more concerned with the process of arranging words than with the meanings of the words themselves. As influenced by the modernist prose of Gertrude Stein, the objectivist poet Louis Zukofsky, and the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (who proposed that language was itself a game), the Language poets spread their influence through such journals as *This* magazine and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Magazine*. In □Hum,□ the stanza □I know what days are. / The other is weather□ both follows and precedes lines with the words □days□ and □weather.□ This focus on simple words is reminiscent of Stein's famous line □Rose is a rose is a rose□ and serves to break down the reader's expectations based on literal interpretations of the words □days□ and □weather.□
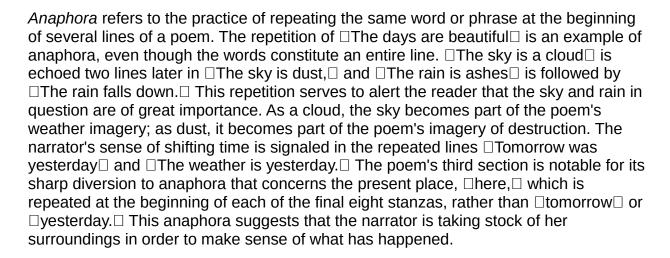
Repetition

The most notable feature of □Hum□ is its repetition. Like a painter who chooses a palette made up of only a few colors, Lauterbach establishes the mood of □Hum□ by choosing a palette of words that she arranges in different combinations in order to achieve a particular mood. □Days□ appears ten times, □beautiful□ nine times, and □here□ eight times. Other words repeated multiple times include □tomorrow,□ □today,□ □yesterday,□ □sky,□ □rain,□ □weep,□ □ashes,□ and □dust.□ In addition, several lines are repeated in their entirety. □The days are beautiful□ appears nine times; □Tomorrow was yesterday□ appears twice. This repetition emphasizes words

that the author deems important. The repetitions fall mainly into two categories: words representing time and place (□here,□ □yesterday,□ □today,□ and □tomorrow□) and words evoking imagery of nature and destruction (□weep,□ □ashes,□ □dust,□ □rain,□ □sky,□ and □fall□). Collectively, these repeated words create images that are at once ethereal, ominous, and transient, suggesting the narrator's sense of unease and sadness and her shifting perceptions of reality. Ultimately, the line □The days are beautiful□ may serve as an example of irony, as if the narrator repeats the phrase in order to reassure herself of something she wishes to be true, despite the evidence of destruction that surrounds her; also, in ending the poem, the line may be meant to evoke the sense of rebirth and renewal that, however distant, might follow any loss.

Anaphora

Anaphora refers to the practice of repeating the same word or phrase at the beginning of several lines of a poem. The repetition of □The days are beautiful□ is an example of anaphora, even though the words constitute an entire line. □The sky is a cloud□ is echoed two lines later in □The sky is dust,□ and □The rain is ashes□ is followed by □The rain falls down.□ This repetition serves to alert the reader that the sky and rain in question are of great importance. As a cloud, the sky becomes part of the poem's weather imagery; as dust, it becomes part of the poem's imagery of destruction. The narrator's sense of shifting time is signaled in the repeated lines □Tomorrow was yesterday□ and □The weather is yesterday.□ The poem's third section is notable for its sharp diversion to anaphora that concerns the present place, □here,□ which is repeated at the beginning of each of the final eight stanzas, rather than □tomorrow□ or □yesterday.□ This anaphora suggests that the narrator is taking stock of her surroundings in order to make sense of what has happened.

Historical Context

Postmodernism

Lauterbach's writing, including ☐Hum,☐ is firmly grounded in the postmodern tradition. Postmodernism evolved primarily after World War II, when writers and artists declined to restrict themselves to the confines of form and structure that had defined artistic expression in previous generations. By definition, postmodernism is a continuation of modernism, which was itself a primarily twentieth-century artistic movement that influenced music, literature, and the visual arts by challenging accepted cultural norms. In terms of poetry, modernism was marked by the work of W. H. Auden, one of Lauterbach's acknowledged influences. The postmodernists continued to develop the avant garde in the arts by becoming even more experimental in their work.

Many postmodernists created works of music, poetry, and painting that were deemed ☐minimalist☐ because of their stripped-down, elemental style. In music, the postmodernist composer John Cage created a composition that does not require any instrument to play a single note. ☐Color field☐ painters such as Mark Rothko created large canvases made up of solid squares of single colors, and writers such as Raymond Carver penned stories in which meaning is derived from what does not happen or from what happens in multiple ways. Lauterbach's poems, including ☐Hum,☐ can be considered postmodernist because of her frequent use of repetition, short lines, simple language, and fragmentary images.

The Impact of September 11

On the morning of September 11, 2001, almost three thousand people died in near-simultaneous terrorist attacks in which four domestic passenger airplanes were hijacked and crashed into the World Trade Center, in New York; the Pentagon, in Arlington, Virginia; and a field in Somerset County, Pennsylvania. The country, and indeed the world, was stunned by the events, which marked the first time the United States had been attacked on its home soil since Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941. Unlike Pearl Harbor, however, millions of people saw much of the events of September 11 on live television, thus themselves witnessing the enormity and severity of the attacks and the loss of innocent lives. Collectively, the raw emotions evoked by the attacks engendered an unprecedented feeling of national mourning. This feeling of overwhelming disquietude is what Lauterbach explores in ☐Hum,☐ wherein ☐everyone weeps,☐ and ☐the towers are incidental.☐

Lauterbach, who was then living and working in New York City, first published ☐Hum☐ in 2005, four years after the terrorist attacks took place and the subsequent so-called war on terror, as led by the United States, had become mired in political controversy. However, ☐Hum☐ is not concerned with the perpetrators of the attacks or with how the nation responded; rather, Lauterbach focuses solely on an individual's visceral reaction
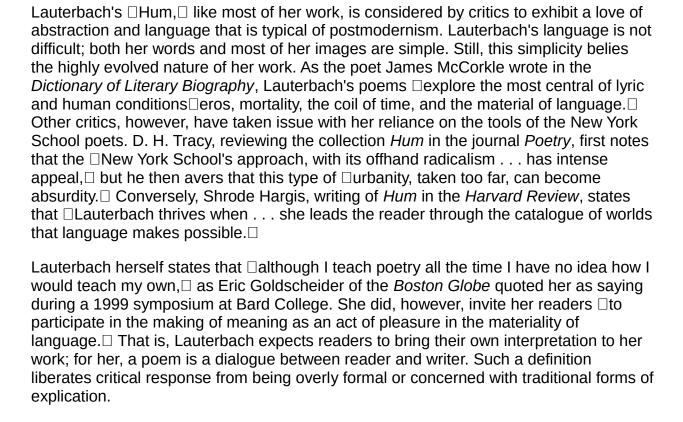
to a sky filled with ashes. Many artists and poets created works in response to these attacks. The philosopher Arthur C. Danto, in an essay published in *ArtNet* magazine, writes of the possibility of the art world's responding to the tragedy:

By day's end the city was transformed into a ritual precinct, dense with improvised sites of mourning. I thought at the time that artists, had they tried to do something in response to 9/11, could not have done better than the anonymous shrine-makers who found ways of expressing the common mood and feeling of those days, in ways that everyone instantly understood.

In the years that followed, the images and memory of September 11, 2001, became part of the American consciousness and permeated all aspects of society. One year later, *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11*, an anthology of poems inspired by the disaster, was published by Regent Press, while *Poetry after 9/11: An Anthology of New York Poets* was published by Melville House.

Critical Overview

Lauterbach's □Hum,□ like most of her work, is considered by critics to exhibit a love of abstraction and language that is typical of postmodernism. Lauterbach's language is not difficult; both her words and most of her images are simple. Still, this simplicity belies the highly evolved nature of her work. As the poet James McCorkle wrote in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Lauterbach's poems □explore the most central of lyric and human conditions□eros, mortality, the coil of time, and the material of language.□ Other critics, however, have taken issue with her reliance on the tools of the New York School poets. D. H. Tracy, reviewing the collection *Hum* in the journal *Poetry*, first notes that the □New York School's approach, with its offhand radicalism . . . has intense appeal,□ but he then avers that this type of □urbanity, taken too far, can become absurdity.□ Conversely, Shrode Hargis, writing of *Hum* in the *Harvard Review*, states that □Lauterbach thrives when . . . she leads the reader through the catalogue of worlds that language makes possible.□

Lauterbach herself states that □although I teach poetry all the time I have no idea how I would teach my own,□ as Eric Goldscheider of the *Boston Globe* quoted her as saying during a 1999 symposium at Bard College. She did, however, invite her readers □to participate in the making of meaning as an act of pleasure in the materiality of language.□ That is, Lauterbach expects readers to bring their own interpretation to her work; for her, a poem is a dialogue between reader and writer. Such a definition liberates critical response from being overly formal or concerned with traditional forms of explication.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Wilson Peacock is a writer and editor of articles about literature. In this essay, she discusses the role of the poet in times of national crises, focusing on Lauterbach's Hum and Robert Pinsky's 9/11.

One of the poet's main responsibilities is to deliver us from clichés in moments when words threaten to fail us. It is so hard to know what to say is what so many *do* say when confronted with grieving friends or loved ones. Rare is the eulogy that does not include the words of a poet, be that poet contemporary or biblical, as part of ritual's salve. This phenomenon was writ large after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when the United States cohered as a single community united by grief. The nation's poets, masters and novices alike, moved to the forefront during this time, their collectivity of words creating a liturgy like none other. Lauterbach's Hum stands out as one of the least literal yet most effective of these poems. Its power is derived from the use of ordinary means simple words and images to express extraordinary thoughts.

As in so much minimalist art, Hum is as notable for what it says as for what it does not say. It does not even say its title; a hum is in essence the opposite of spoken words. Beginning with the title and the repetition of the first verse, The days are beautiful, the poem appears at first glance as innocuous as that bright September morning in 2001. In a series of twenty-seven fleeting stanzas, many only seven or eight words in their entirety, Lauterbach launches into a deceptively breezy lamentation that cycles through the concepts of shifting time, the beauty of weather, a shower of ash and dust, and a catalog of material objects that have nothing to do with airplanes, terrorists, heroism, freedom, or any of the other knee-jerk signifiers that permeate so many 9/11-inspired poems. In direct reference to the tragedy at hand, she says only, The towers are incidental and The towers are yesterday. Hers is a poem that expresses the unbearable lightness of being in a moment of incomprehensible madness.

Hum is different from other 9/11-inspired poems because it is not what we might expect. The days are beautiful is repeated again and again, nine times total, in a poem essentially about mass bloodshed. The statement is too important to be taken as an example of irony and perhaps too opaque to be taken literally. A contrasting poem is the one that the *Washington Post* commissioned the U.S. poet laureate Robert Pinsky to write in commemoration of the first anniversary of 9/11, which he titled, simply enough, 9/11. Pinsky's words are full of images that soothe rather than challenge; the work's three-line stanzas are a litany of easily grasped references to Emily Dickinson, Will Rogers, and Marianne Moore. It includes the occasional high-school vocabulary word (expropriation), pedestrian phrases such as terrible spectacle and doomed firefighters, and the requisite splash of patriotism via references to the Eagle's head and the Statue of Liberty. Pinsky hits all the notes a poet laureate is expected to hit, corralling a population of nearly three hundred million people into a single-minded collective we that wrings its hands over a self-conscious desire for titillating televised disaster. In doing his job, Pinsky delivers a belated eulogy that stirs

up just enough discomfort to be neatly swept away with phrases borrowed from □America the Beautiful.□

Perhaps, however, a comparison is unfair. After all, the poems □Hum□ and □9/11□ were written for different reasons. Lauterbach's lamentation is a visceral reaction to a tragedy still under way, while Pinsky's poem is a reflection of events a year in the past. Lauterbach's narrator is concerned with the images at hand: images of dust, ash, a feeling that tomorrow is gone. She writes of a sky subsumed by sound and debris, of weather that is nothing, and of weeping, all of which serves to upset her sense of equilibrium, her sense that □the days are beautiful.□ Hers is the reaction of a camera's lens, unfiltered by politics, raw in its questions (□What is this dust?□). Moreover, she presents the voice of a single narrator, one of a million witnesses, whose experience is unique. Her narrator alone is the one who notices the robe □that smells of the night□ and the stones □loosed from their settings.□

Conversely, Pinsky's purpose is not to put forth a singular vision but to act as the spokesman of our collective response; hence the recitations regarding donated blood, box cutters, and Ray Charles. As a minimalist work, □Hum□ does not need to focus on the images of crushed fire engines or the doctors and nurses who had nothing to do because there were no walking wounded to be saved. Lauterbach's intent as a poet is to create an unusually variegated collage based on snatches of thoughts, much as Picasso's painting *Guernica* achieved the power of a thousand-page manifesto through a single mural in black and white that starkly and simply depicted the devastation from the bombing of Guernica, Spain, and its civilian population during the Spanish Civil War.

Several generations ago, Wilfred Owen, a soldier who ultimately died in battle, alerted the world to the first killing fields of the modern age in his poem □Dulce Et Decorum Est,□ which presented the indelible image of a soldier suffocating in the □thick green light□ of a mustard gas attack. His words were graphic; they needed to be, in order to convey the horror of World War I to those who still espoused outdated romantic notions of warfare from the insulated confines of their Edwardian-era parlors. Almost a century later, on 9/11, there was no insulated parlor; millions upon millions saw the horror firsthand. Television collapsed the physical distance between the site of the World Trade Center and the places where the nation's people stood and sat, whether Manhattan or Montana.

Thus, the twenty-first-century poet's language of tragedy need not be gruesome to be effective. Whereas Owen described blood □gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs□ of the dying soldier, Lauterbach wrote, □The sound is falling,□ and both achieved much the same effect. The horror of 9/11 was already seared into the nation's collective mind. Owen, in a world not yet saturated with mass media, served as a literary war correspondent with literal images. His was a poem of admonition; his way of saying, □Tomorrow was yesterday,□ was to call the battle cry □It is sweet and proper to die for one's country□ (□Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori□) a lie. Both Owen and Lauterbach bore witness to the greatest horrors of their generations and responded with eulogies that burst free from the clichés of their respective days.

The narrator of □Hum,□ in the midst of horror's confusion, seeks to reassure herself of what she knows. She knows the days are (supposed to be) beautiful; she knows what is (supposed to be) incidental; she knows that the ash falling from the sky is *not* weather. She knows the towers are gone; she knows tomorrow is gone□at least the tomorrow that she had imagined yesterday. These are the unfiltered, unedited thoughts that occur in the suspended moment of time between perception and understanding.

Conversely, Pinsky's narrator has had a year to consider the tragedy. Instead of focusing on the action in slow motion, he gathers together images of popular culture in order to create touch points that soothe. Who is more effective, one then asks, Lauterbach or Pinsky? The answer depends on what one seeks from poems. With more universal words (everyone knows of yesterday, tomorrow, dust, and weather, but not everyone knows of social security numbers, Frederick Douglass, and Ray Charles's charity recording), Lauterbach's □Hum□ comes closer to evoking the primal aspects of sorrow aroused by 9/11 than Pinsky's poem. Pinsky writes for the part of the popular consciousness that is American; Lauterbach writes for the part of the American consciousness that is human. With respect to the universal need for words to ameliorate tragedy, and with respect to finding the □right thing to say□ without descending into standard funereal clichés, □Hum□ demonstrates that less can be more. With its musical attributes of repetition and refrain, Lauterbach's poem is a stirring dirge that is elegant in its universality and unprocessed rawness of feeling.

Source: Kathy Wilson Peacock, Critical Essay on □Hum,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

In the front matter of *Hum*, Lauterbach includes a quote from Shakespeare's play *King Lear*: What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears (act 4, scene 6). Go to a busy place and look with your ears; that is, close your eyes and listen to the surrounding sounds for at least ten minutes (or take a tape recorder and listen later). Did you hear anything that you might not have heard had your eyes been open? Write a short essay on what you saw when you were listening and relate your experience to Lauterbach's Hum.

If you did not know that Hum was about the tragedy of September 11, do you think you would have deduced as much? Using pictures from magazines and newspapers, assemble a collage based on the images Lauterbach evokes in her poem. Present your collage to the class and lead a discussion about the kinds of feelings your collage brings to mind, noting whether they are similar to or different from Lauterbach's themes in Hum.

Many of Lauterbach's poems are inspired by specific paintings or musical compositions. Pick one of your favorite songs or works of art and write a poem about it. Then write a companion essay on how your words were influenced by the subject you chose.

Read other poems inspired by the terrorist attacks of September 11. Write an essay describing the images and language of these poems and compare and contrast them with Lauterbach's Hum.

Lauterbach gave a speech on February 12, 2003, at a symposium called Poems Not Fit for the White House, which was organized to protest the cancellation of a White House poetry event because many of the guests opposed the war in Iraq and had written protest poems to present at the event. Perhaps poets come to the fore at such times, Lauterbach said in her speech, which was reprinted in an article by Joshua Clover in the *Village Voice*, because we already live at the margins, we represent a kind of powerless power, and maybe people become interested in this. Research news articles of this event and use them as the basis for a classroom debate. Prepare and deliver a short speech explaining whether or not you believe the poets were right to foster such controversy.

What Do I Read Next?

Poetry after 9/11: An Anthology of New York Poets (2002), edited by Dennis Loy Johnson and Valerie Merians, presents forty-five poems written in response to the terrorist tragedies. Featured poets include Stephen Dunn, Hal Sirowitz, Molly Peacock, and Alicia Ostriker.

The poem □9/11,□ by Robert Pinsky, a former U.S. poet laureate, was commissioned by the *Washington Post* for the first anniversary of the attacks and was published on September 12, 2002. It is available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/poems/july-dec02/9-11_9-11.html from *Online Newshour*.

Frank O'Hara's □Why I Am Not a Painter,□ from his 1965 collection *Lunch Poems*, is a breezy response to all of his admirers who wondered why he became a poet. As a founding member of the New York School of poets, O'Hara was greatly influenced by the contemporary art scene of the 1950s.

W. H. Auden's □September 1, 1939,□ published in his *Selected Poems* (1940), was written to commemorate the day the Nazis invaded Poland at the beginning of World War II. Written in the first person, it recounts Auden's reaction to hearing the news as he sat in a Manhattan diner.

John Ashbery, considered one of the greatest American poets of the twentieth century, was a leading voice of the New York School of poets. His 1986 collection *Selected Poems* offers an overview of his work.

Jorie Graham's *Overlord* (2005) tackles many of the same themes that interest Lauterbach with a style that is also influenced by abstract art. While Graham's work is infused with more religious imagery than Lauterbach's, this collection, like *Hum*, is a post-9/11 meditation.

Lauterbach's *If in Time: Selected Poems, 1975-2000* (2001) offers readers an overview of the poet's career.

The Night Sky: Writings on the Poetics of Experience (2005) is a collection of essays written by Lauterbach for the *American Poetry Review* between 1996 and 1999. Subjects include the impact of her father's early death on her work and ruminations about poetry's role in popular culture.

The comic novel *A Nest of Ninnies*, written by the New York School poets John Ashbery and James Schuyler and originally published in 1969, is a satirical look at the follies of middle-class and upper-class suburbanites. The work was written in a slightly experimental □dialogue□ format.

Further Study

Altieri, Charles, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After*, Blackwell, 2006.

Altieri, a leading poetry critic, offers a comprehensive overview of modernism in poetry, with emphases on Wallace Stevens and W. H. Auden, both of whom have influenced Lauterbach. Altieri concentrates on explaining how modernism arose and how poetry has been influenced by the other arts.

Lauterbach, Ann, □Links without Links: The Voice of the Turtle,□ in *American Poetry Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1, January-February 1992, p. 37.

Lauterbach discusses contemporary poetry, touching on the subject of the Persian Gulf War. She believes that poetry represents a distaste for power and states that poets need to reject literalism in their work in order to convey truth and create a new perception of the world.

□□□, □2001 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize,□ in *Nation*, February 4, 2002, pp. 33-34.

Lauterbach gave this speech several months after the 9/11 attacks. In it, she discusses her reaction to the tragedy and provides context for how other poets have responded to this and other disasters.

Lauterbach, Ann, and Tim Peterson, □Rootless Elegiac: An Interview with Ann Lauterbach,□ in *Rain Taxi*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Summer 2002.

Lauterbach discusses Wallace Stevens, the influence of music on her poetry, and her sensory □synesthesia,□ in which sounds, images, place, and time meld into each other during the creative process.

Yezzi, David, Review of *On a Stair*, in *Poetry*, Vol. 21, No. 5, August 1998, p. 292.

In a brief review of Lauterbach's collection, Yezzi comments (not altogether favorably) about the tension in Lauterbach's work and her many artistic references.

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Review of *Hum*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 252, No. 16, April 18, 2005, p. 58.

Tracy, D. H., Review of *Hum*, in *Poetry*, Vol. 187, No. 4, January 2006, pp. 338-39.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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