Mind Study Guide

Mind by Jorie Graham

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Introduction

Jorie Graham's "Mind" first appeared in the literary journal *Water Table*, and is included in her first collection of poems titled *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* (1980). The title for the collection comes from German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's book *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. The poem appears in the fourth section of the collection, following "The Nature of Evidence," a poem about the speaker's ability to apprehend reality. Comprised of thirty-nine short lines, "Mind" tackles a similar theme and is more accessible than many of Graham's poems. However, it still requires rereading for full appreciation.

Graham is known for abstraction in her poems, which means she is as interested in ideas and argument as she is in presenting striking images. Many of her poems are informed by her reading in history, science, art, and philosophy. In "Mind," Graham uses a series of metaphors to describe the idea of the mind and the thinking process. Her poem embodies, as much as depicts, thinking. By comparing processes of nature with the ways in which the human mind makes sense of perception, Graham draws on the romantic tradition in poetry from Samuel Taylor Coleridge through Wallace Stevens, particularly in the ways these poets describe the relationships between imagination and reality, nature and humanity, and the self and other.

Author Biography

Jorie Graham was born May 9, 1951, in New York City, the daughter of journalist Curtis Bill and sculptor Beverly (Stoll) Pepper. She was raised in Italy, as her father worked as *Newsweek's* bureau chief in Rome. As a teenager, she haunted old churches and watched Michelangelo Antonioni films, soaking up Italy's history and culture. After being expelled from the Sorbonne in Paris for participating in student protests, Graham transferred to New York University, where she studied film with Haig Manoogian and Martin Scorsese. Graham began publishing poems in literary journals and magazines regularly during her twenties and published her first book, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*, in 1980, with Princeton University Press. In poems such as "Mind," critics recognized Graham's metaphysical leanings and her ability to synthesize disparate material from the sciences, philosophy, literature, art, and history. Her primary influences, however, are modern poets such as William Butler Yeats, Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, and John Berryman.

Upon earning a bachelor of fine arts degree from New York University in 1973, Graham enrolled in the writing workshops at the University of Iowa, receiving her master of fine arts degree in 1978. She has spent almost her entire adult life in academia, teaching at institutions such as Murray State University in Murray, Kentucky; Humboldt State University in Arcata, California; Columbia University in New York City; and the University of Iowa in Iowa City. In 1999, Graham was named Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University, succeeding Irish poet Seamus Heaney. She was the first woman to hold this professorship.

Graham's passion for teaching has not stifled her passion for writing. Her numerous collections include *Erosion* (1983); *The End of Beauty* (1987); *Region of Unlikeness* (1991); *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems, 1974-1994* (1995), for which she received a Pulitzer Prize (1996); *The Errancy* (1998); *Swarm* (1999); and *Never* (2002). In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, Graham has been awarded numerous fellowships and grants, including a 1979 Discovery/*The Nation* award, and a MacArthur "genius" grant. She has also received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Whiting Foundation. In 1997, she was named a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

Poem Text

The slow overture of rain,
each drop breaking
without breaking into
the next, describes
the unrelenting, syncopated
mind. Not unlike
the hummingbirds
imagining their wings
to be their heart, and swallows
believing the horizon
to be a line they lift
and drop. What is it
they cast for? The poplars,
advancing or retreating,
lose their stature
equally, and yet stand firm,
making arrangements
in order to become
imaginary. The city
draws the mind in streets,
and streets compel it
from their intersections
where a little
belongs to no one. It is
what is driven through
all stationary portions
of the world, gravity's
stake in things. The leaves,
pressed against the dank
window of November
soil, remain unwelcome
till transformed, parts
of a puzzle unsolvable
till the edges give a bit
and soften. See how
then the picture becomes clear,
the mind entering the ground
more easily in pieces,
and all the richer for it.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-6

In the first lines of "Mind," the speaker offers a metaphor for the mind, comparing it to "the slow overture of rain." Overture in this context denotes an orchestral introduction to a musical dramatic work. The speaker compares the way the mind moves from one perception to the next, one thought to the next, with the way an overture leads into the musical work itself. The mind is "unrelenting" because it never stops. It is "syncopated" (also a musical term) because, as in an overture, there is a shift to something else, maybe another perception, another subject, or another way of thinking. These lines comment both on the workings of the mind and the workings of this poem, which also shifts subjects.

Lines 7-13

The speaker continues comparing the mind with natural phenomena. The speaker imagines that the hummingbird and the swallow perceive the world in ways that make sense to them. The hummingbird, for example, mistakes its wings for its heart because its wings are its most strategic asset. Hummingbirds flap their wings from fifty to two hundred times per second and can lift from perches without pushing off. Swallows, which dip and dive dramatically, could easily confuse how the horizon appears to them in flight for what they are doing to it (i.e., lifting and dropping it). This connection between the birds' misunderstanding of the world and themselves and the human mind suggests that human beings also delude themselves into thinking they know what is real and what is imaginary. When the speaker asks, "What is it / they cast for?," she anthropomorphizes them. This means that she projects onto them human attributes, in particular the attribute of desire. "Casting" suggests fishing, a familiar enough activity for birds.

Lines 14-19

The speaker continues her comparisons, noting the swallows' perception of poplars, quickgrowing trees of the willow family found in North America. The speaker describes how their appearance changes depending on the swallows' perception of them. In describing them as "making arrangements," the speaker personifies them, just as she had the swallows and hummingbirds. "Arrangement" is also a musical term meaning an adaptation of a musical composition by rescoring.

Lines 20-24

The speaker reverses the subject and object of perception. Whereas in the previous descriptions she shows how birds perceive the physical world, in this description she

positions the city as the subject drawing "the mind in streets." This reversal gives credit to the phenomenal, material world in constructing reality. The streets "compel" the mind "from their intersections," meaning from where lines connect. The relationship between subject and object, perceiver and perceived, dissolves here.

Lines 25-28

The speaker depicts the mind as an active force that is nonetheless "driven" (though by what readers are not told). These lines are typical of the heavily abstract statements for which Graham is known, statements that are difficult to translate or paraphrase. Gravity has a stake in "all stationary portions / of the world." These "portions" are stationary because gravity keeps them that way (unlike, for example, hummingbirds or swallows, which can defy gravity with their ability to fly).

Lines 29-35

The speaker uses the symbolic image of leaves in the November soil to suggest decay and fragmentation. When the "edges give a bit / and soften" they lose their definition and become part of their environment. This blurring of a thing (i.e., leaves) with the larger body to which it belongs (i.e., soil) echoes the way in which the mind also blurs as it changes from subject to subject, perception to perception.

Lines 36-39

The speaker implicitly compares the leaves to the mind, suggesting that in time both fragment and come to rest in the ground, where they are "all the richer for it." This last image suggests a picture of a compost heap where the leaves return to the soil from which they came, and the mind returns to a state in which it no longer differentiates the particularities of the physical world, and is no longer aware of itself as a perceiving entity.

Themes

Nature

Nature has long been a source of inspiration and an object of inquiry for writers and scientists. Graham employs images of nature to underscore humanity's connection to it. By describing the mind in terms of rain, hummingbirds, swallows, leaves, and soil, the speaker shows how human beings are part of the processes of nature. She links these processes to human acts of perception and imagination. The first lines of the poem, for example, liken "The slow overture of rain" to "the unrelenting, syncopated / mind." By comparing the mind with natural processes, Graham binds the mind inextricably to them. The mind functions in an organic way and, like nature, is subject to and defined by all that surrounds it. Like the leaves described in the latter part of the poem, the mind also dies "in pieces." For Graham that is more a reason for celebration than mourning.

Imagination

"Mind" explores the interplay between imagination and reality, suggesting that subjective experience colors perception of the world. Graham uses the hummingbird and the swallow as examples of beings that believe something about nature that human beings, with their scientific understanding of the world, do not. However, the birds' reality is no less real because their beliefs are different than the beliefs of human beings. In exploring the realm of the imagination, Graham writes from the tradition of romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who developed their own styles instead of imitating other writers, and who privileged individual expression. For romantics, the imagination is also the seat of creativity, from which poetry itself springs. By making the subject of her poem the mind and how it apprehends reality, Graham emphasizes her debt to the romantic tradition.

Reality and Appearances

"Mind" attempts to do two things. First, through a series of comparisons, it attempts to figuratively describe what the mind is. Second, it asks readers to question their understanding of reality by paying attention to *how* their own minds work. By using a series of images connected by abstract statements, Graham forces the reader to participate in the meaning-making process, rather than merely passively consuming her images. This strategy of presenting images and then showing how they are not what they appear to be calls to mind Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, a text in which the Greek philosopher argues for the existence of a higher reality than the one human beings experience with their senses. The ultimate reality of "Mind" is, paradoxically, earthbound and unresolved.

Style

Imagery

Writers create pictures in readers' minds through images utilizing the five senses. Graham employs aural imagery when describing "the slow overture of rain," visual imagery when describing "hummingbirds / imagining their wings," and tactile imagery when describing "the dank . . . soil." With the exception of the city and its streets, all the images in her poem come from nature.

Abstraction

Abstraction refers to ideas or qualities as opposed to things. Graham mixes abstract statements with her imagery, often using them to comment on the imagery. For example, in the following lines from the middle of the poem, she comments on the mind, using an abstract statement:

It is
what is driven through
all stationary portions
of the world, gravity's
stake in things.

Graham's abstractions make her poem difficult while also making it intriguing. She has attributed her propensity for abstraction to her schooling in France.

Enjambment

Enjambment, also know as run-on lines, occurs when the syntactic unit, or sentence, runs over onto the next line for completion. It is the opposite of an end-stopped line, in which the syntactic unit or sentence ends with the line. Graham employs enjambment throughout "Mind," each line depending on the next to complete its meaning. In this way, the form of the poem dictates the way it is read. The poem is both a description of mind *and* an illustration of how the mind works during the reading process.

Historical Context

Graham wrote "Mind" in the late 1970s and it appears in her 1980 collection *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*. Like many of her poems, "Mind" is not set in any identifiable time or place. Rather, it is a meditation on an idea, the idea of mind. During the 1970s and 1980s, Graham was both a student and a professor in various departments of English, where post-structural literary theories were becoming a regular part of the curriculum. Post-structuralism refers to a set of approaches or attitudes towards texts rather than any codified body of knowledge, and is a response to structuralist theories of knowledge. Some of the features post-structuralist theories share include a rejection of ideas such as essentialism and foundationalism, which inform structuralism. Essentialism suggests there is a reality beyond language, unmediated by how human beings name the world and invest it with significance. Plato, for example, was an essentialist in his belief that ideal forms of ideas and things existed outside of how human beings saw them. Foundationalism refers to the notion that systems of thought can accurately reflect the world and how it works. The ideas of post-structuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, both of whom question conventional ways in which critics interpret texts, became both celebrated and hated in English departments. The antihumanist theories of Derrida and Foucault were a source of contention *and* an inspiration for scholars and students alike, and contribute in no small part to the ongoing factionalism in humanities departments today.

The anti-war protests of students in American universities in the 1960s and 1970s helped foster an attitude of rebellion that created an intellectual space for new ideas. This rebellion reached a violent apex in 1970 when Ohio National Guardsmen opened fire on students during a noontime demonstration at Kent State University in Ohio, killing four people and wounding nine others. The protests of the 1970s carried over into curricular reforms in the university itself, as previously ignored groups battled for representation in courses and departments. During the 1970s and 1980s, for example, a number of women's studies programs were formed, as well as programs explicitly addressing the history and culture of groups such as African and Asian Americans. The 1970s and 1980s also saw a dramatic increase in the number of master of fine arts programs in creative writing offered in American universities. Graham herself studied in such a program at the University of Iowa. Thousands of students enroll in these programs each year to hone their writing skills, hoping to land jobs teaching in higher education or to win fame with a blockbuster novel or screenplay.

Outside the academy during these decades, writers explored humanity's increasing alienation from society and one another. Toni Morrison's novels *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), and *Beloved* (1987), for example, examined the plights of African Americans in a society violently hostile towards them. David Mamet's plays *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984) and *Speed the Plow* (1988) chronicled the declining morality of the real estate and show business industries respectively. John Updike continued his detailed examination of the spiritual emptiness of middle-class suburban white men in novels such as *Rabbit is Rich* (1981).

Critical Overview

Graham was well supported in writing the poems for *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*. Poems included in the work had been accepted by quality literary journals such as *American Poetry Review*, *Iowa Review*, and the *New Yorker*, and she received a grant from the Paul Mellon Fund of Princeton University Press to help publish the collection. Because she is still a relatively young poet whose work has just begun to be addressed by critics, there is no criticism as yet explicitly addressing "Mind." However, some critics have written glowingly about *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*. In *American Poetry Review*, Dave Smith writes that the collection is "as promising a first book as any recently published." In his essay "About Jorie Graham" for *Ploughshares*, Robert Casper praises Graham's ability and calls her poems "crystalline in their concision." In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Peyton Brien points out the influences of artists and poets on Graham's work, including Paul Eluard, Voltaire, Paul Cézanne, and Mark Rothko, all of whom are subjects of individual poems by Graham. Noting the brevity of many of the collection's poems, Brien argues, "Graham's formal strategies in the book are relatively simple and well designed to enhance the intellectual searching of a neophyte poet." Margaret Gibson, who reviewed the collection for *Library Journal*, emphasizes the abstract quality of the poems, writing, "These are distanced poems, whose difficult language catches and moves us with its beauty." Gibson, herself a noted poet, calls Graham's poems a "mixture of wisdom and discord, desire and faith."

Unlike the critics above, Askold Melnyczuk does not find Graham's first book inspiring, calling it "apprentice work." In "The Mind of the Matter: CAT Scanning a Scat Singer," written for *Parnassus*, Melnyczuk claims, "The work in this first book leaves this reader annoyed and disappointed. Graham seems to be testing out ways of making poems that will support a content yet to surface."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of literature and composition. In this essay, Semansky considers the philosophy of Graham's poem. In the introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1990*, Graham says about poetry: "Each poem is . . . an act of the mind that tries . . . to clean the language of its current lies, to make it capable of connecting us to the world." However, her own poems often belie this very claim, as they suggest that language is incapable of such an act, and that humanity's separation from the world and human beings' separation from one another are inevitable. "Mind" shows how lying forms an inescapable part of human experience, and how self-delusion is unavoidable.

The very act of writing a poem called "Mind," which attempts to describe in a universal fashion how the mind works, is in keeping with Graham's metaphysical tendencies. Metaphysics, derived from the Greek *meta ta physika* ("after the things of nature"), refers to a branch of philosophy that pursues knowledge that cannot be gleaned from human sense perception. It is conceptual and abstract in nature, terms critics also use to describe Graham's poetry. More specifically, Graham's poem addresses questions of epistemology (that area of metaphysics concerned with how human beings know what they know) and ontology (that area concerned with the nature and relations of being, or things that exist). Metaphysics by its very nature, however, is speculative. Attempting to describe any subject outside of historical or cultural context dooms one to accusations of universalizing. It is an accusation, however, with which Graham is willing to live.

One of the first "lies" of "Mind" is its use of figurative language. In comparing how the mind works with how nature works, the speaker employs metaphors. However, the very act of using metaphor as a means of description demands lying, in that comparisons are always necessarily approximations of the thing described, and part of a system of knowing. In his essay "Figurative Language," Thomas McLaughlin argues, "If figures tell us anything, it's that meaning is up for grabs, that the world can be shaped in an endless variety of forms, that language is a battleground of value systems." "The slow overture of rain" does not accurately describe "the unrelenting, syncopated / mind" because, after all, the mind is not an overture or rain, but "like" them. Furthermore, the comparison of the mind's working with how hummingbirds mistake "their wings / to be their hearts" and how swallows mistake the horizon to be a fishing line underscores the idea that knowledge of the outside world is impossible, or at least unsatisfying, and that what remains is the imagination.

For Graham, as for Wallace Stevens, the imagination is what animates human knowledge, and the faculty that gives the world meaning. However, the imagination itself is an inherently unstable category, and so different for each person as to make shared experience impossible. Some thinkers, in fact, claim that the category of the imagination itself is innately misleading. For example, in his study *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton argues that, historically, the imagination, "offered the writer a comfortingly absolute alternative to history itself." Eagleton notes that the imagination became emphasized as a transcendent realm during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when the function of poets and artists in society had changed, and their work was now seen as

"product." Eagleton writes, "The whole point of 'creative' writing was that it was gloriously useless, an 'end in itself' loftily removed from any sordid social purpose." In the last two decades, this notion of the imagination as a transcendent space from which writers can comment on humanity's condition has only solidified.

Rather than "social purpose," the aim of poems such as "Mind" undermines the idea of a common language, adding credence to the notion that poetry is only for other poets, and that real communication, the kind that can "connect people to the world," is impossible. How else to make sense of lines such as the following:

The city
draws the mind in streets,
and streets compel it
from their intersections
where a little
belongs to no one. It is
what is driven through
all stationary portions
of the world, gravity's
stake in things.

Graham's abstractions here make it difficult to know to just what she is referring, and even if readers are able to "decode" the references, their reaction is more likely to be "so what" than "wow!" or "hmmmm." Askold Melnyczuk, writing in *Parnassus*, writes of Graham's collection that: "Only rarely does the voice speak from an urgency deep enough to justify breaking that cardinal rule of the Pythagoreans: be silent, or say something better than silence."

The poem's final image, that of the mind like leaves in November soil disintegrating into so much compost ("and all the richer for it") is an image of the mind's instability, its refusal to be anchored to the world, yet the inevitability that it will be. This image suggests a more materialist philosophy of mind than a romantic one and is more consistent with post-structural theories of the mind than it is with Graham's notion of the imagination as a place of salvation and comfort, and poetry as a practice that can bring people together. Poststructural theorists question the very possibility of transcendence and transparent communication. Theorists such as Foucault write about "subjects" rather than individuals, and locate the mind in relation to the material phenomena of culture and history. Since "subjects" are embodied in the world, their thinking is social and they take their identities from the groups to which they belong. Reading "Mind" one is hard pressed to "imagine" a body behind the words or a society in which the speaker makes her observations. Yet, the very ideas about the mind that Graham's poem implies are rooted in the twentieth century, and in philosophical and literary discourse.

It is not that Graham is naïve or unaware of the contradictions inherent in her statements about poetry and her poems themselves. In an interview with Mark Wunderlich, Graham offers her wish for poetry's future:

If I have a wish, it is that the body's (the heart's)
knowledge be trusted again, that the fear of the
body□certainly understandable in the age of AIDS
and the plague-like virulence of our instant information
technologies□decrease, and that the senses be
used again in our poetry, that real images be felt, written,
and most importantly, understood for the knowledge
they contain.

Understanding "real images . . . for the knowledge they contain" is an odd desire, coming from one whose own poems appear to question the possibility that the real can ever be known, and whose abstractions dilute the impact of her own images. But then, Graham has made her reputation *writing* poetry, not *talking* about it.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Mind," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Prebilic is an independent author who writes and analyzes children's literature. She holds degrees in psychology and business. In this essay, Prebilic discusses how Graham's poem considers the normally weak proclivity of the human phenomenological mind.

Graham published her first collection, *Hybrids of Plants and Of Ghosts*, in 1980. Graham admired the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, a renowned philosopher, and based the title on his characterization of human beings. Graham bases her collection on the themes of death and change. This collection gained recognition for Graham; subsequently, critics learned to both admire and condemn her poetic prose.

According to Bonnie Costello in *Contemporary Literature*:

> Graham emerged in the 1980s as a major poet, distinguished for her philosophical depth, her sensuous vision, the grandeur of her style and themes. . . . In her first book, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*, Graham limited her meditation primarily to tentative reflections based on natural objects.

Graham's associations with the art forms of nature bring beauty and style to her work. As Dave Smith says in *The American Poetry Review*, "Hers is an intricately shaped poetry that is as given to decorum as to discipline." Graham uses her good taste and precision to lure readers into a proactive participation. Whether she poses a question or presents an idea in a new way, Graham's words compel readers to grasp humanness. She presents her ideas succinctly and without pretense. Her style encourages readers to search for a deeper meaning in life and to make sense of things around them.

"Mind," a thirty-nine line poem about change, fits in well into *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*. According to Costello in *Contemporary Literature*, Graham limited her "meditation to individual objects of nature or art around which her thoughts could circle to form twisting, elegant designs." This meditation describes "Mind"; Graham implements this twisting, elegant design superbly by using nature's concrete beauty around which her thoughts can take shape: rain, hummingbirds, swallows, and poplars. As the verse meanders down the page, "Mind" contends with the weakness of the human phenomenological mind. She seeks to convince readers that their minds resist transformation. Graham successfully suggests that the truth of peoples' minds consists of objects and events as people perceive them and not of anything independent to them.

Graham opens "Mind" by immediately introducing an element of nature. She infers a metaphysical connection between the rain and the mind, which swiftly presents the human mind in a way that lures readers into reflection: "The slow overture of rain, / each

drop breaking / without breaking into / the next, describes / the unrelenting, syncopated / mind."

The words in Graham's poem fall like an overture: the unhurried, introductory aspect of rain. Her words have formed like raindrops: condensed over time from vapor in the atmosphere and spread systematically onto the page. They stand alone with meaning, each drop gently taking its path without spilling into the next one. Graham's language coaxes readers to broaden their perspectives; some of the words, "overture" and "syncopated," may create a desire to pull out the dictionary and to learn more. This desire starts the search for a deeper meaning.

Graham requests that readers believe that the brain is unrelenting, yet weak. She begins this presentation like the beginning of a rainstorm. At first, readers notice the raindrops, yet they do not foresee the storm's intensity. This engaging metaphor alludes to the idea that people's minds often fail to connect the information that dribbles in, especially at the beginning of an experience. As readers enter her poem, they notice nature, yet do not foresee the journey that comes more intensely as the poem develops.

As Graham's reflections circle around the natural objects, her ruminative process formulates her images and germinates her concept of the mind's weakness. Readers experience this as Graham continues her poem: "Not unlike / the hummingbirds / imagining their wings / to be their heart, and swallows / believing the horizon / to be a line they lift / and drop." The hummingbirds, with brilliant iri- descent plumage and long, slender bills, form an image in their mind's eye that their wings are their hearts. In addition, the graceful swift-flying passerine swallows believe that the perceptible intersection of the earth and the sky can only be a line that they lift and then drop. Although from a human perspective, one knows that these perceptions do not hold truth; it does not change the imagination of the hummingbirds or the belief of the swallows. According to Costello in *Contemporary Literature*, Graham "celebrated the spiritual and metaphysical reach of art" by painting these pictures with her words. Graham invites readers to reflect on her prose and hopes that they acquire the belief that they perceive things in ways that meet their needs and that create safety.

"What is it / they cast for?" Graham's interactive technique, a question, gently asks readers to join in her meditative journey and experience the philosophical and spiritual moment she has presented. Readers cannot easily answer this question in the same way they would describe the color of the sky or the characteristics of a horse. It is more like describing the shape of a jewel whose light radiates from within. The answer requires interpretation. Interpretation comes from within one's mind. It also comes with vulnerability as one identifies and expresses one's beliefs.

Graham continues this inward journey as she introduces the poplars: "The poplars, / advancing or retreating, / lose their stature / equally, and yet stand firm, / making arrangements / in order to become / imaginary." These fast-growing deciduous trees have unisexual flowers densely crowded with catkins. Perhaps the density of their weeping flowers distinguishes them: they lose and gain, advance or retreat, their beauty based on the season or the soil's health. Graham suggests that the trees, like all living

things, have an undeniable status or achievement level that they have gained and lost regularly. As the season's change and events occur around them, these trees stand firm. Perhaps this quality mimics the weak, unrelenting nature of people's minds. As events occur and achievements come and go, the mind holds onto its beliefs, its imagination, and its unreality.

The mind forms the perceptions it needs, and needs what it creates: "The city / draws the mind in streets, / and streets compel it / from their intersections / where a little / belongs to no one." People believe that the people, animals, and wildlife that reside in a city, created it. When looked at in a new way, could it be that the city created the mind? Do the streets define people instead of people defining the streets? What forms the intersections, a locus of points where the streets cross, or the street pavers laying the material and posting a stop sign? As Graham reverses the common beliefs, she argues that people's minds create the views that suit them best. It asks the age-old question: Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Graham surmises that the city may be a place where a little belongs to no one. This verse in the poem requires that readers step aside from a literal interpretation and begin to meditate on the deeper value to be gained.

Graham continues: "It is / what is driven through / all stationary portions / of the world, gravity's / stake in things." Gravity draws matter towards its center. It is the natural force of attraction exerted by earth upon objects at or near its surface. Graham concedes that gravity pushes, propels, or presses itself onward forcibly through all fixed parts of the earth. It is the way of things; it exists and influences all things just because they are near its power. In the same way, Graham contends that people's minds claim their power over their world. It is the way of people's minds. People's experiences filter through this mind's eye and perceptions form. They emerge as reality. Only if one allows one's mind's eye to shift focus will one allow for transformation.

As the poem winds towards resolution, Graham sums up her underlying principle: "The leaves, / pressed against the dank / window of November / soil, remain unwelcome / till transformed, parts / of a puzzle unsolvable / till the edges give a bit / and soften." Looking at experiences in a new way encourages transformation. Using the vivid metaphor of a window, Graham begins to persuade readers that transformation does occur.

The word "window" originated from Scandinavian invaders and settlers of England in the early Middle Ages. Related to Old Norse *vindauga*, this compound word summarized the ideas of wind and of eye. At one time, windows contained no glass. So, the "Window of November," as Graham defines it, ties in directly with her concept of seeing things without a filter. The wind caresses the eye of change, the dank leads to a discomfort that encourages discovery, and November sits on the heels of an unwelcome winter season. These things do not feel good. They are unwelcome. They propel people to see things differently. Perhaps people allow their new knowledge to transform them. Graham concludes that if people can look at the unsolvable parts of the puzzle in new ways, the edges of the problem will begin to resolve. When problems seem less rigid, solutions present themselves more fully. The shifts in attitudes allow people to change

the nature, function, or condition of something. People can convert their experiences and attitudes of their mind to a new, richer awareness.

Graham presupposes that readers accept her idea when she says: "See how / then the picture becomes clear, / the mind entering the ground / more easily in pieces, / and all the richer for it." People allow their experiences to change them for the better. Through new choices, people can seek out and experience things in ways they never thought possible. When people allow this change to take place in small doses, like pieces of a puzzle they finally link, the picture of their experience becomes clear in a new way. One's mind becomes grounded in true reality. The dank no longer feels unwelcome but becomes an accepted and appreciated part of one's life. People know the dank leads to a window that defines an opportunity. It becomes part of life's cyclical nature. Graham believes that this realization transforms people; their lives contain more meaning and significance.

"Mind" invites readers to take an inward journey to discover its gem. It is not didactic, yet offers an opportunity to learn. Expressive words encourage readers to gain knowledge of new terminology. Associations with nature allow readers to view Graham's theory of transformation in a new way. Although not clear-cut, her poem imparts a straightforward idea: people see life through their mind's filter. Yet, people can change their filter. The ultimate picture comes from a puzzle whose pieces fit together as one meditates. Whether or not a reader agrees with Graham's idea that the mind's truth consists of objects and events as people perceive them, one thing is certain: her meditative poetry draws readers into the mind of Graham, and Graham into the minds of her readers.

Source: Michelle Prebilic, Critical Essay on "Mind," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

Partch is a Jungian astrologer, writer, and graphic designer. In this essay, Partch considers the validity of Jorie Graham's use of poetry as a "medium for spiritual undertaking."

While there are many excellent poets who are fully accessible through a single glance at a single poem, Graham is not a poet whose work can be understood or appreciated in isolation.

Some critics may object to the need for any special "preparation," lobbying for the democracy of immediacy. But how many uninitiates can truly appreciate a Jackson Pollock painting, say, without some introduction? To the casual or innocent eye, his work looks like the careless splatterings of a child or a madman, and indeed these comparisons have been made. With a little guidance, it becomes apparent that Pollock was attempting not at all to make pretty pictures but to portray movement in time. Beyond that, he sought to challenge the whole conceptual framework of reality□to bend space and time. With this perspective, his "action paintings" can be appreciated as delayed-shutter portraits of his dance, more like capturing the motion of writing with a penlight in the dark than snapshots of a posed static scene.

Graham is an enthusiastic fan of Pollock's work and shares similar aims of evoking process in her own work. Rather than the body's dance through the fields of space and time, she seeks to simulate, and then to stimulate, perception and thought isolation, to extend this motion beyond the limits of language, the static "poetic moment" and the printed page, into the reader's ongoing experience. Graham seeks in her poetry to create for herself and recreate for the reader moments of opening, of beginning, rather than endings. Her poems may not always succeed on these grounds, but they must be judged as moving collages rather than failed still life snapshots, or the neatly wrapped-up happy ending will always appear to be missing. The open-ended lack of resolution is deliberate, not accidental. The suspended non-ending is intended to invite the reader's participation.

Many of Graham's detractors, such as Sven Birkerts, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, question "the viability of poetry as an instrument of philosophy." Birkerts is also bewildered by "the onward march of mind and spirit searching for some arrival, some consummation, some end to all of this tending toward." But who is to say what is a suitable theme for poetic experience and expression: only matters of the heart? Can the processes of the mind really be declared off-limits? Apart from the aesthetic values normally applied to poetry (and here Graham's work must speak for itself), surely the realm of experience to be explored is no less a matter of poetic license than experiments in form. Some would have it that the immediately accessible realm of the senses and emotions, with some kind of conclusive *point*, constitutes the only "appropriate" terrain for "the poetic impulse." How can one really reserve the poetic endeavor for such touchy-feely subjects as love, loss, and memory? It could even be said that the whole crux of the poetic moment lies in the collision between

consciousness and experience□reality. Poets, even the ancients, have always explored this synaptic leap of faith between the so-called objective and the subjective, between outer fact and inner response. Moments of sublime realization, however ambivalent or complex, cannot be disqualified as too intellectual if the entire question of mind is the very landscape of the poet's (perhaps deeply emotional) experience. The postmodern view has shown once and for all that the very notions of self, identity, experience, other, object, etc., are nothing if not conceptual.

The mind can be said to be the heroic subject of a great deal of Graham's enormous body of work, and "Mind" can by no means be considered an exhaustive portrait. But she does here achieve the elusive goal of transcendence, going beyond the individual personal mind. The poem reaches beyond even the projected divine mind to the more mystical concept of the phenomenon of mind underlying and pervading reality on a subatomic level. For mystics of every tradition, mind inhabits and vivifies the infinite spaces between things and is the governing principle behind thingness□the very ground out of which subject and object emerge. In keeping with the model of modern physics, the perspective of modern phenomenology maps the activity of the mind as more of a field of consciousness than a linear progression of thoughts. The mind is seen as but one phenomenon within the universe, which is a field of interwoven and interacting forces, rather than a simple progression of causally related events.

The opening lines of "Mind" evoke and mimic the atmospheric affect of this nonlinear percolation:

The slow overture of rain,
each drop breaking
without breaking into
the next, describes
the unrelenting, syncopated
mind.

Everyday thoughts may seem to unfold one into the next, in an orderly single-file procession of cause and effect. However, Graham points out that in actuality, thoughts are often more random and chaotic than one might like to think, more like popcorn popping or rain drops falling than links in a chain. Sometimes thoughts come one after the other, sometimes simultaneously□but one thought may no more arise with any causality or logic from its predecessor than one rock following another in an avalanche.

Graham both imitates and mocks this common misconception of the inherent orderliness of the mind's associative processes in the shape of the poem□a neat, narrow column of no more than five words on a line□and the poem's uninterrupted flow, coming on in a downpour of images, ideas, and words. But in the end the poem does resolve itself, not with the decisive closing of a door but with a beckoning to a window, where it tells the reader to "See."

The second group of lines following the lines above portray the mind's tendency to project the patterns of its own workings onto what it perceives:

Not unlike
the hummingbirds
imagining their wings
to be their heart, and swallows
believing the horizon
to be a line they lift
and drop. What is it
they cast for?

Later in the poem, Graham subtly shifts the ground of what readers think of as cause and effect:

The city
draws the mind in streets,
and streets compel it
from their intersections
where a little
belongs to no one.

Thoughts tend to follow their routes, once established, as obediently as falling rocks yield to "gravity's stake in things." So, the question arises, does the mind arise from thought and not the other way around? Can the mind exist without language? Is there mind without thinking? Descartes would have it that being itself is dependent on thought, while spiritual teachers of the East and the West would have it precisely the other way around□ being begins when thinking stops. Only when the continual chatter of the mind is silenced, when its relentless busy-bee buzzing is stilled, can consciousness truly interact with reality. This is what is meant by pure mind. Pure mind is the intersection toward which Graham is ever striving□the intersection between not only reality and consciousness but between being and doing, between experience and expression. Graham is continually striving to write from this place of clarity of pure being and to evoke those gem-like moments for the reader.

Like Pollock's attempt to explode the boundaries of his canvas, Graham seeks to speak from silence, to arrive at a place beyond words, by using language to delineate the contours of the ineffable.

It is only when the sharp edges of the "puzzle pieces," the random shards of Mind (thoughts), soften a bit that readers can see how

the picture becomes clear,
the mind entering the ground
more easily in pieces,
and all the richer for it.

The unity of the whole emerges from the fragmentation of the habitual mental processes of the mind, into the fertile ground of the universal mind from which all phenomena, within nature and human consciousness, arise. When the edges are sharp and rigid,

overly defined, the edges cannot penetrate the ground of their own being and the puzzle remains unsolvable. It is only when the thoughts' hard edges "give a bit" that they can return to their source.

In a 1992 interview with Thomas Gardner in the *Denver Quarterly*, Graham commented, "Poetry is an extraordinary medium for spiritual undertaking." The immediate and unceasing appreciation and recognition that her work has received□ including a Pulitzer Prize in 1996□attest to the validity and viability of her endeavor. The more one knows about poetry and spirituality, the more one will appreciate the risks Graham has taken in her bold experiments in both her content and its necessary form, as well as her task and her achievement. As to the appropriateness of her "use" of poetry for philosophical or spiritual purposes, one might even ask, what else? Are they not one and the same?

The ambitious thoughts represented in "Mind" are not so shabby, coming from the precocious mind of a twenty-something-year-old poet in the late 1970s, a self-confessed hybrid of Whitman's lyricism on the one hand and Nietzsche's philosophy on the other.

Graham's early musings inscribe an arc with a promising trajectory; a promise duly fulfilled in the ongoing experiments and mature work of this highly complex, philosophical, and intellectual□ and also beautifully musical□poet of the postmodern mind.

Source: Marjorie Partch, Critical Essay on "Mind," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Adaptations

On May 20, 1999, Graham read and talked with Michael Silverblatt, producer and host of the literary interview program "Bookworm," broadcast on public radio stations nationwide. In 2001, the Lannan Foundation released a video of the reading and talk, *Jorie Graham*. Tapes can be ordered by writing to The Lannan Foundation, 313 Read Street, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501-2628.

Audio Literature has published an audiocassette on which Graham and other women poets read poems from *The Muse in the Body: Love Poems by Women*, edited by Catherine Bartlett. Tapes can be ordered by writing to Audio Literature, 370 W. San Bruno Ave., Ste. F, San Bruno, CA 94066.

Topics for Further Study

Draw a picture of *how* you think (not what you think). What image or images would best represent your thinking processes? Compare your picture with others in your class and discuss differences and similarities.

Set aside a particular time at the end of each day to meditate on your thinking. Reflect on what subjects have occupied your mind for the day and describe these subjects and your responses to them in a notebook. At the end of two weeks, read through your entries and write a short essay describing any patterns you might see in your descriptions.

In groups, discuss the differences between the brain and the mind. What points, if any, does the class agree on and how do you account for any disagreements?

Some critics note similarities between Graham's poetry and that of John Ashbery and James Tate. After reading a few poems from Ashbery and Tate, discuss the similarities and differences among the three.

Read the rest of the poems in Graham's collection *Hybrids of Ghosts and of Plants*, taking notes on her statements about identity, perception, and language. Then, write a short essay describing Graham's worldview based on the poems in this book.

In "Mind," Graham describes the mind as "unrelenting." With your classmates, brainstorm a list of other adjectives you would use to describe the mind. Discuss as a class and be prepared to defend your choices.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: A 1980 study by the American Council on Education shows that college freshmen are more interested in status, power, and money than at any time during the past fifteen years. Business management is the most popular major.

Today: Students continue to enroll in business programs and classes. However, because of the downturn in the economy, a master of business administration degree no longer carries the same clout that it did in 1980.

1980s: Columbia University, the last all male Ivy League school, begins accepting women in 1983.

Today: Like hundreds of other colleges and universities, Columbia University now offers classes and degrees online, making it possible for students to receive a degree without physically attending class.

1980s: In 1985, scientists confirm a hole had opened in the ozone layer surrounding the earth, posing considerable potential health risks for humans.

Today: In 1999, scientists announce that warming temperatures in the Antarctic have caused two ice shelves to break up and melt faster than anyone expected, posing potential danger to human welfare if sea levels rise too quickly.

What Do I Read Next?

Graham's 1995 collection *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974-1994* includes poems from her five previous volumes of poetry, including *Erosion* and *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*. This collection received the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

The Best American Poetry 1990, edited by Graham and David Lehman, was published in 1991. Graham penned the introduction, in which she elaborates on her ideas of what makes good poetry.

John Ashbery writes many of the blurbs for Graham's books, and she for his. Like Graham, Ashbery has been influenced by many nineteenthand early twentieth-century French poets. His comic novel *A Nest of Ninnies*, co-written with poet James Schuyler, was published in 1976.

Graham derived the title of *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* from German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's characterization of human beings in his treatise *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Walter Kaufmann's 1995 Modern Library translation of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is considered one of the best translations available.

Steven Pinker's 1997 study *How the Mind Works* explains what the mind is, how it evolved, and how it allows people to sense the world around them. Pinker is an M.I.T. psychologist whose research interests include evolutionary biology.

Critic Helen Vendler has been one of Graham's chief admirers, writing about her poetry in her 1995 study *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham*.

Further Study

Bottoms, David, and Dave Smith, eds., *The Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets*, William Morrow & Co., 1985.

This is one of the first major anthologies in which Graham's work appeared.

Furniss, Tom, and Michael Bath, *Reading Poetry: An Introduction to Theories, Histories, and Conventions*, Prentice Hall, 1996.

Furniss and Bath provide an introduction to the ideas and techniques that can help students critically analyze poetry. This study shows how various and contemporary strands of literary theory can be applied to difficult poetry such as Graham's.

Holden, Jonathan, *Style and Authenticity in Postmodern Poetry*, University of Missouri Press, 1986.

Holden analyzes Graham's work and that of her contemporaries in this critical study.

McDowell, Robert, ed., *Poetry after Modernism*, Story Line Press, 1991.

This collection of essays by poets and critics examines the various aspects of postmodern poetry such as formalism, the relationship between business and poetry, politics and poetry, and psychoanalysis and creativity.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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