On Location in the Loire Valley Study Guide

On Location in the Loire Valley by Diane Ackerman

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Introduction

Diane Ackerman's poem "On Location in the Loire Valley" was published in her fifth volume of poetry, *I Praise My Destroyer* (1998). The poem is written in the form of a ghazal, which is a poetic form that has flourished for hundreds of years in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu literature. Most poets who write ghazals in English produce much looser forms than the traditional one, but Ackerman's "On Location in the Loire Valley" follows the traditional pattern quite closely. The poem appears to tell a story about a company of actors who are making a film on location in the Loire Valley in France. The poem also reflects, in a highly allusive manner, on the nature of human life□its transience, the search for communication, and its unanswerable questions.

Author Biography

Diane Ackerman was born October 7, 1948, in Waukegan, Illinois, the daughter of Sam (a restaurant owner) and Marcia (Tischler) Fink. She attended Boston University from 1966 to 1967, and then enrolled at Pennsylvania State University, from which she graduated in 1970 with a bachelor of arts degree. She pursued graduate study at Cornell University, graduating in 1973 with a master of fine arts degree. She went on to earn a master of arts degree in 1976, and a Ph.D. in English in 1978. She then held teaching positions at the University of Pittsburgh (1980-1983) and Washington University (1984-1986), and was a staff writer for the *New Yorker* from 1988 to 1994.

In 1976, Ackerman published *The Planets: A Cosmic Pastoral*, her first solo volume of poetry. It was followed by *Wife of Light* in 1978, *Lady Faustus* (1983), and *Jaguar of Sweet Laughter: New and Selected Poems* (1991).

In the early 1990s, Ackerman published two nonfiction works about natural history, *A Natural History of the Senses* (1990) and *The Moon by Whale Light, and Other Adventures among Bats, Penguins, Crocodilians, and Whales* (1991). These books established Ackerman's national reputation as a nature and science writer. *The Moon by Whale Light*, a collection of four essays previously written for the *New Yorker*, was selected by the *New York Times Book Review* as a "New and Noteworthy Book of the Year."

During the mid-1990s, Ackerman wrote three more nonfiction books: *A Natural History of Love* (1994), which explored romantic love from almost every possible angle; *The Rarest of the Rare: Vanishing Animals, Timeless Worlds* (1995); and *A Slender Thread: Crisis, Healing, and Nature* (1997), which was Ackerman's account of working the night shift of a suicide prevention hotline. In 1998, Ackerman produced her first volume of poetry in seven years, *I Praise My Destroyer*. *Origami Bridges: Poems of Psychoanalysis and Fire* was published in 2002.

Ackerman's other nonfiction works include *Deep Play* (1999), which examines how humans transcend the mundane daily world through "play" activities, including art and religion, and *A Natural History of My Garden* (2001), in which Ackerman observes the passage of the four seasons in her own garden. Along with her works of poetry and nonfiction, Ackerman has also written books for children, several plays, and several television documentaries. *The Senses of Animals: Poems* (2002, reissued as *Animal Sense*, 2003) is a highly praised book of poetry for children that includes illustrations by Peter Sis.

Ackerman has won numerous awards and prizes during her career, including the Wordsmith Award in 1992; the Golden Nose Award from the Olfactory Research Fund in 1994; and the John Burroughs Nature Award in 1998. She was named a "Literary Lion" by the New York Public Library in 1994.

Plot Summary

Couplet 1

The title of the poem, "On Location in the Loire Valley," suggests that it was prompted by some actors' experiences during a film-shoot in the Loire valley in France. The first line of the first couplet presents an image of mistletoe hanging in poplar trees. Mistletoe is a parasitic evergreen that grows on certain trees. The mistletoe absorbs water and mineral nutrients from the tree, damaging the tree. Some trees may be killed by an infestation of mistletoe. This is why in the poem the poplars "can't survive." The poet may use the phrase "clouds of mistletoe" because the abundance of the plant's white berries suggests clouds.

The second line of the couplet provides a consolation. The stately poplar trees, although festooned with the mistletoe that will kill them still have a beneficial effect on human life. They create a feeling of enchantment when a person looks at them.

Couplet 2

The Loire Valley is known for its many castles built during the medieval and Renaissance eras. Line 1 makes it clear that the film is being shot inside one of these castles. It is winter, the castle is extremely cold, and the actors and film crew are uncomfortable because of it. It feels as if cold steel is passing up their spines.

In line 2, the people in the castle shiver from the cold as they make the film. "Decant" means to pour something from one vessel into another. The actors pour their lives from one vessel (their real, everyday life) into another vessel, that of the film they are making.

Couplet 3

In line 1, there is a moment on the movie set when everyone is silent and motionless. Line 2 explains why. The sound engineers have to record what is called in film sound jargon, "room tone." Room tone is the unique sound that every room has when there is no human activity in it. It may be the hum of a computer, the creaks of furniture, the sound of an air conditioner or furnace, the sounds of traffic from outside. In this case in the castle perhaps it might be sounds from outside, such as the wind. Sound engineers will record at least thirty seconds of "room tone," which can then be later used in the film-editing process. If, for example, cuts are made in the original soundtrack, room tone can be inserted at that point so that the background sound will remain continuous.

The last sentence of couplet 2, "Soundmen record the silent rant of our lives," contains an oxymoron. An oxymoron is a figure of speech which combines contradictory terms. Since a "rant" is loud, wildly extravagant speech, it cannot logically be "silent." Perhaps the poet means that although speech has ceased, the "rant" in which the actors have

been engaging (presumably dialogue in a scene from the movie) can still be felt and somehow heard (or sensed) in the silent room.

Couplet 4

In this couplet, the speaker of the poem describes his or her experience making the film. The speaker uses the first-person plural "we" to include all the people involved in the film. No precise meaning can be conclusively demonstrated, but perhaps "consort with chance" refers to the ins and outs of the storyline, in which, as in life, chance always plays a part. "Cascade through time" may refer to the actors' experience of acting in a film that is set in a different time than their own.

In line 2, "each trip" may refer to the different places to which the actors and film crew travel in the course of their filmmaking. To gallivant means to go about in search of amusement or excitement, so the phrase "the gallivant of our lives" may refer to the enjoyment they all had on these trips. The phrase might also be taken as a more general observation, that life is a continual chase after excitement.

Couplet 5

This couplet describes the end of the filming process. In the film, the actors have presented the passage of an entire life in a short space of time, "a whole life in miniature" in all its different aspects and relationships. A "small death at the end" may refer to the death of one of the characters in the film or to the severing of a relationship from the past. The line only makes suggestions; the reader can supply the details. The phrase "we adjourn to the constant of our lives" refers to the actors stepping out of the roles they played in the film and returning from their fictional selves to their real selves, the "constant" of their lives.

Couplet 6

This couplet is about the ways the moviemakers and actors part company. Farewells are awkward. It seems as if no one really feels sincere about what they say to each other, as if the whole process lacks any shred of genuine feeling. There is little conversation at mealtimes, and goodbyes are quickly said. So it is that the people "dismantle" their lives, as if their lives are like the film sets, erected for a certain purpose and taken apart and moved away when that purpose has been fulfilled. It is a mechanical process, without human warmth.

Couplet 7

The actors have now returned from their trip on location in the Loire Valley. They tell their loved ones about it, but exaggerate their exploits for the sake of telling a good story. Line 2 may be one of the stories they tell, about night drives through fog. The use

of the word "nonchalant" to describe these trips suggests the exaggeration with which the stories are told. Nonchalant in this context probably means "unconcerned." The reader gets a picture of a group of people driving through thick fog but pretending it does not bother them at all.

Couplet 8

This couplet continues to encapsulate the adventures that the group of actors went through during the filming. "Alone with legendary art" might mean many things, but it suggests the artwork in the castle where part of the film was made. The same applies to "herding sheep in St. Michel," an act done in connection with the film. Line 2, "the wizardries of smell," is harder to explicate with any specificity. It certainly alludes to the well-known capacity of the sense of smell to evoke distinct memories and impressions, which give it a kind of wizard's power. The last thought in the couplet echoes the phrase "gallivant of our lives" from the fourth couplet. It suggests that there was a lot of good-humored teasing or pleasantries on the film set.

Couplet 9

The first thought, "the heart has a curfew," suggests there are some things that cannot be communicated. At some point the heart must, so to speak, shut down. This resembles a curfew, which is a time after which people must remain indoors. The speaker, and the other actors for whom he or she speaks, explains that they are able to tell people the external details of where they went and what they did, but they cannot explain who they were. Presumably this refers to the essence of the role each played in the film, although why they cannot explain this role is not made clear. An alternative meaning is possible too. Instead of describing the experiences on location, the speaker may be making a general reflection on life, that people cannot convey the deeper truths of their lives, or who they really are. This leads to the final statement, that their lives are pantomimes. A pantomime is a dramatic entertainment often based on a fairytale, or it may be a dumb show, in which actors express their meaning through action and gestures rather than words.

Couplet 10

This couplet is difficult to interpret because the two lines make up a fragment, not a complete sentence. In the absence of a subject and a verb, the meaning becomes problematic. The most likely interpretation seems to be that the couplet refers back to "but we cannot tell them who" in the previous couplet, meaning perhaps that they cannot fully explain the characters they portrayed in the film (or perhaps they cannot fully explain themselves). The speaker states what they were not, rather than what they were. They were not the "shadow family" they became. Nor can they fully convey the "shiver beneath the smile," which may refer to the cold conditions in which the film was made (mentioned in the second couplet). The first part of the final line, "not the people

we clung to" remains difficult to explicate, however, unless it is referring again to the roles each actor played, in the sense that an actor "clings" to his character. On the other hand, if the couplet refers to the alternative meaning that is possible in couplet nine, and the speaker is making a general reflection on life, the couplet suggests that in spite of the "mad canter" of life, real knowledge of who we are and who we are dealing with in life remains elusive.

Themes

Death in Life

In a ghazal, the couplets can be read as selfcontained poems, so there may be a multiplicity of themes rather than one. Sometimes the first couplet sets the tone for the remainder, although that is by no means always the case. In this ghazal, the first couplet creates an image of life being gradually destroyed by a parasite (mistletoe), and yet beauty is present too. The mistletoe decorates the trees and lends enchantment to life. This description of a natural phenomenon may metaphorically suggest that even if life is always a journey to death and death is present in life, life is still worth living.

The remainder of the poem, however, does not seem to extend or amplify this suggestion. The couplets that follow are like a series of snapshots of different moods, activities, and places. Some express enjoyment and light-heartedness (couplet 4) or a sense of wonder about life (couplet 8); others express discouragement and even cynicism about human relationships (couplet 6).

The Inability to Know

In the final two couplets, the thought seems to take a more serious and reflective tone, as if the speaker is meditating on the experience he or she shared with the other actors and filmmakers on location in the Loire Valley. The conclusion does not seem to be an optimistic one. Couplet 9 seems to hint with regret that in some profound way, the people in the poem (and by implication, all humans) are not able to fully communicate with each other. One final ingredient is missing; perhaps it is complete truthfulness to one's own experience of oneself and others. The refrain of "What a pantomime, our lives" suggests a certain ridiculousness about the lives evoked.

Perhaps the implication is that humans are all like characters in a film, acting some kind of role that has been appointed. Just as in a film the viewer sees only the moving images projected on the screen, never the screen itself, so too a person does not really know him or herself□that is, who he or she is underneath, beyond all the roles he or she is compelled to play in life.

The final couplet, although the meaning is obscure, contains phrases that suggest a negative or darker view of life: "shadow family"; "shiver beneath the smile"; and especially "the people we clung to in the mad canter of our lives." The images conjured up by this phrase suggest people clinging to each other out of need□the desire for affection or protection perhaps, in a life that cannot always be controlled, that hurtles along at a fast pace but is not wholly rational and cannot be fully understood. The effect of the poem is itself like the filmmaking it describes: scene after scene flashes by, there is variety and entertainment, but the answers to deeper questions about meaning and authenticity are more problematic.

Style

The Ghazal

The poem is written in the form of a ghazal. This poetic form has strict requirements, although Ackerman chose not to observe all of them. A traditional ghazal is a poem of five to fifteen couplets. Each couplet should be a self-contained poem that does not depend on the others for its meaning, although it is permissible to have all the couplets carry the same or similar theme. Because each couplet is self-contained, there should be no run-on lines, or enjambment, between couplets. The length of the lines must be the same. The second lines of each couplet must all end with the same word or words. This is the refrain. There must also be a rhyming pattern to the words that immediately precede the refrain.

The ghazal formula can be clearly seen in this poem. The refrain is "our lives." This phrase concludes all the couplets. The words before the refrain rhymes, at least in part, in each couplet: "enchant" (couplet 1), "decant" (2), "rant" (3), "gallivant" (4), "constant" (5), "dismantle" (6), "nonchalant" (7), "banter" (8), "pantomime" (9), and "canter" (10).

In strictly formulated ghazals, the first couplet must have the words of the refrain in both its lines, a requirement Ackerman chose not to follow. She settles for a rhyme instead, so "survive" (line 1) rhymes with "lives." She also inserts an additional rhyme, "can't" (line 1) rhyming with "enchant."

Alliteration

The poem also makes frequent use of alliteration, which is the repetition of initial consonants (this is not a requirement of the ghazal). "In stone castles, cold's steel," for example, the repetition in reverse order of the "s" and "c" sounds makes the phrase almost a tongue-twister. The "s" sounds are repeated in the phrase that follows, "straight up the spine." The combination of "s" and "c" sounds continues in "shivering to the core," and the "c" is heard again in "decant." Thus the entire couplet is built around the interplay of alliteration.

A similar effect is found in couplet 3, only this time the two initial consonants are "r" and "s." "Restlessness stops" at the end of line 1 is alliteratively echoed in reverse in "Soundmen record" and in "silent rant" in line 2. In couplet 4, the alliteration is with the letters "c" and "t," as in "consort with chance, cascade through time. / Each trip."

Historical Context

The Ghazal

The ghazal originated in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and Pashto literature during the eighth century. The ghazal first appeared in the West in nineteenth-century German poetry. Poets who used the form included Schlegel and Goethe. Since the 1960s, ghazals have also been written in English.

One of the most famous writers of ghazals was Ghalib (1797-1869), who lived in Delhi, India and wrote in Urdu. Admiration for Ghalib's work has been responsible for stimulating an interest in the ghazal in English poetry over the last few decades. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Adrienne Rich, W. S. Merwin, William Stafford, Mark Strand, and William Hunt, among others, all rendered ghazals by Ghalib into English. These poets have varied greatly over how closely to follow the form of the original, and most have opted not to use rhyme. In *Ghazals of Ghalib*, edited by Aijaz Ahmad, Rich made the following comment about Ghalib's ghazals: "The marvelous thing about these ghazals is precisely (for me) their capacity for both concentration and a gathering, cumulative effect." This twofold effect of epigrammatic concentration and cumulative meaning may be part of the reason that the ghazal has attracted other poets writing in English, such as Robert Bly and Denise Levertov, who are among those who have written loosely structured ghazals.

Free Verse and Formal Verse

In twentieth-century poetry, the dominant type of versification was free verse. Free verse is poetry that does not use traditional poetic meter with its rhythmic regularity. It employs differing line lengths and does not usually rhyme. During the period from about 1960 to 1980, the vast majority of poetry written by mainstream poets was in free verse. Poet and cultural critic Dana Gioia, writing in 1992 in *Can Poetry Matter?*, declares that "Literary journalism has long declared it [rhyme and meter] defunct, and most current anthologies present no work in traditional forms by Americans written after 1960." Gioia also notes that since 1960, only two new poetic forms have entered American poetry, the double dactyl and the ghazal, although he also notes that ghazals are "usually in a dilute unrhymed version of the Persian original."

Gioia also notes, however, signs of a revival of formal verse by young poets in the 1980s. First collections like Brad Leithauser's *Hundreds of Fireflies* (1982) and Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986) are written entirely in formal verse and were well received by reviewers. Gioia himself published two poetry collections, *Daily Horoscope* (1986) and *The Gods of Winter* (1991) that employed both formal and free verse.

It is this category of poets□who make use of free verse but do not scorn traditional forms□to which Ackerman belongs. Although most of the poems in *I Praise My*

Destroyer are written in free verse of varying types, Ackerman also shows a penchant for more formally structured verse. "On Location in the Loire Valley" is not the only poem written in a poetic form of foreign origin that has strict formal requirements. "Elegy," for example, is a villanelle, a French verse form that must have five tercets (three-line stanzas) and a final four-line stanza, as well as a precise rhyme scheme. Ackerman also employs rhyme in the couplets that compose "A Herbal" and "Timed Talk."

Critical Overview

Few volumes of poetry today win more than a handful of short reviews in the mainstream journals and magazines, but Ackerman's poetry has been routinely praised in reviews that do appear. Although he does not single out "On Location in the Loire Valley" directly for comment in his review of *I Praise My Destroyer*, John Taylor makes the following observation in *Poetry*: "Ackerman weaves intricate, colorful, often stunning linguistic tapestries. . . . her exuberant yokings of nouns and unexpected adjectives can likewise divert from quieter, more meditative feelings."

Similarly, in *Booklist* Donna Seaman comments that Ackerman "wears poetic forms like silk dresses that sway and cling in perfect accord to the stride of her lines." Seaman praises Ackerman's metaphors and humor and finds her poems "wholly original." In *Library Journal* Ann van Buren observes that "all of the poems [in *I Praise My Destroyer*] reflect intelligence, awareness, and the skillful employment of rhyme, meter, alliteration, and other poetic techniques."

However, Carolyn Kizer in *Michigan Quarterly Review* faults Ackerman for a tendency to be too "grandiose," and offers the view that "As a poet she is careless□including her grammar□and inclined to hyperbole." This comment is interesting in light of the puzzling grammar of the final couplet of "On Location in the Loire Valley."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses the form of the traditional ghazal in Urdu. He also shows that although Ackerman's poem adheres closely to the traditional form, the ghazal has proved to be a highly flexible form when adapted by poets in English.

"On Location in the Loire Valley" is not only a remarkable exercise of formal technique in a little- known verse form, it is one of those poems that is thematically impossible to pin down. It seems to dance airily within its formal boundaries. At the same time as it delights in the comings and goings of life, it seems also to pose unanswerable questions, and in so doing it takes on a darker hue.

Ackerman's achievement is all the more remarkable because most of the ghazals that have appeared in English, whether translations of poems written in Urdu or original ghazals, have lacked some of the fundamental qualities that are traditionally associated with the form. For example, almost all English translations of the ghazals of the renowned nineteenth-century Indian poet Ghalib, who wrote in Urdu, employ neither a repeated refrain nor a rhyming word immediately before it. They are traditional ghazals only in the sense that they consist of several independent, self-contained couplets. The loss of certain structural elements is nearly inevitable in translations of any strict verse form from one language to another. However, there is one translation of Ghalib that does emerge in English as a recognizably traditional ghazal. The translation is by William Stafford in *Ghazals of Ghalib*.

This ghazal fulfills the formal requirement that the first couplet ends with the repeated refrain. This is known as the Quafia ("longer"). The Quafia appears at the end of the second line of each couplet. However, the repeated rhyming word (known as the Radif) before that refrain is absent from the translation.

One of the few poets other than Ackerman to write a ghazal complete with Quafia and Radif is the American poet John Hollander. In *Rhyme's Reason*, Hollander explains all the forms of English verse with self-descriptive examples.

If ghazals continue to be written in English, as seems likely, a distinctively English type of ghazal may emerge. In order for this to happen, poets writing in this mode will probably have to make more than a cursory study of the form and themes of the original Asian ghazals. This may in turn lead to more experimentation, which will stimulate the creative transformations that happen when an art form crosses a cultural boundary and takes root in new soil.

Scholars of the ghazal as it was practiced in India, where the form has been practiced since the twelfth century, offer many and varying analyses of the nature of the ghazal. One common practice is for the poet to identify or allude to himself in the final couplet, either by his own name or his pen name. For example, this is a translation (in *Masterpieces of Urdu Ghazal*) of a typical final couplet of Mir Taqi Mir, a prominent

Indian poet of the eighteenth century who wrote in Urdu: "Your face, O Mir, is growing pale, / Have you, too, perchance, fallen in love?"

It seems unlikely that many poets writing in English will favor this overt reference to themselves. Indeed, in "On Location in the Loire Valley," Ackerman seems to undercut this tradition, since the implication of her final couplet, far from offering self-revelation, is that such a thing is not possible.

Some authorities, including Agha Shahid Ali, argue that each couplet should have a turn in the thought between lines 1 and 2. Line 2 should surprise the reader with a twist. Ackerman follows this practice in her first couplet: "Clouds of mistletoe hang in the poplars, which can't survive. / Still, decorated with ruin, they enchant our lives." The image of the mistletoe gradually killing the host tree in line 2 gives way to the surprising consolation of line 2. In other couplets, however, Ackerman does not follow this practice. The thought in the first line often continues to the caesura (a pause, indicated by a punctuation mark) in the second line.

Traditionally, each couplet in a ghazal is an independent poem, a complete expression of an idea. The couplets are not required to be related to each other; they need no consistency of theme. K. C. Kanda points out in his introduction to *Masterpieces of Urdu Ghazal* that this is one of the most fundamental traits of the ghazal. However, he also notes that some Indian writers of ghazals have challenged this convention, claiming that it has a stifling effect on the form. They have written ghazals in the style of a *nazm*, in which a single theme is developed throughout the sequence of couplets. In India, where the ghazal remains a vibrant form, this type of ghazal remains the exception rather than the rule, however.

In "On Location in the Loire Valley," Ackerman tends toward the *nazm* style. Although there is little thematic unity in the poem as a whole, she does tell a recognizable narrative of a film crew on location in a specific place. These couplets clearly build on each other to tell a story of sorts, even though many of them also act as independent poetic units.

The same is true for many of the poems written in English that go under the name of ghazal, although the range is very broad. Some ghazals in English abandon the couplet form. An example would be the "Sheffield Ghazals" by well-known American poet Galway Kinnell in his collection *Imperfect Thirst* (1994). These five poems explore the possibilities of the ghazal form as well as anyone writing in English today. Kinnell does not use couplets or rhymes. Each unit of free verse, one or two lines usually but on occasion three or four, often makes a self-contained, epigrammatic statement. "Passing the Cemetery," for example, begins, "Desire and act were a combination known as sin." Each subsequent verse unit makes a seemingly unrelated statement, and yet as the poem progresses, a thematic unity emerges, clustering around issues of sex, sin, and death. Interestingly, these unconventional ghazals conclude with one of the signature features of the original Urdu form. In each of the five, Kinnell addresses himself directly, using his first name, as if he is admonishing or reminding himself of certain realities that the ghazal has revealed.

The "Sheffield Ghazals" show that a prominent poet writing in the English language feels free to takes what is useful from the original form and discard what he considers unnecessary. The fact that, when originally published in the literary magazine *Ploughshares*, these ghazals were entitled "Sheffield Pastorals" shows how loosely the term ghazal can be interpreted.

This freedom of interpretation applies also to the question of the themes addressed by the ghazal. Traditionally, the theme of the ghazal was love (the term ghazal, according to K. C. Kanda, means in Arabic "talking to women"). Love could refer to love for the divine, as well as love for a person. Ghazals were also about beauty and wine (sometimes mystically understood as intoxication with the divine) and philosophical contemplation about life and death. Sometimes ghazals expressed political ideals or social and political satire.

Writers of ghazals in English, however, feel no such constraints on the themes they select. Ackerman's "On Location in the Loire Valley," as well as Kinnell's "Sheffield Ghazals," would be considered unusual in their themes by any traditional yardstick. The English-writing poet is likely to consider any topic about which he or she feels inspired to write to be a suitable theme for a ghazal.

Bearing that in mind, there seems to be every possibility that the ghazal will have staying power as a minor poetic form in literature written in English, comparable to the villanelle and the sestina, two intricate verse forms originating in France. However, it is not likely that the ghazal will attain the popularity that it has maintained in India for many centuries. Even today, that popularity shows no signs of diminishing. As Kanda states:

> During recent years there has been a remarkable revival of interest in the *ghazal*, as is evidenced by the rise, on both sides of the Indo-Pak border, of numerous singers of *ghazals*, whose performances at cultural gatherings, on the television screen, and on cassette players, are eagerly sought after.

There is many an American poet, of ghazals or not, who would welcome this kind of popular acclaim. Whether acclaimed or not, Ackerman's poem, because of its technical mastery of the form as well as its elusive, suggestive themes, certainly qualifies as one of the finest ghazals in the English language.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "On Location in the Loire Valley," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Ackerman's use of juxtaposition and repetition in her poem.

"On Location in the Loire Valley" was first published in Ackerman's poetry collection, *I Praise My Destroyer*. This compelling title refers to death, and the entire volume is devoted to Ackerman's agnostic exploration of what human death means. Death is a process that humans have examined in countless ways. For Ackerman, this examination is done in a dispassionate, scientific manner, drawing on her skills as a naturalist. In his review of *I Praise My Destroyer* for *Poetry*, John Taylor notes that in these poems, "Ackerman opts for exalting the organic processes whereby entities such as ourselves come into existence, exist, then perish." Likewise, in her review of the collection for *Booklist*, Donna Seaman says that "naturalist Ackerman expresses her signature love for the world in all its seething glory." In "On Location in the Loire Valley," Ackerman does this by examining a litany of life experiences within the context of a film shoot, using juxtaposition and repetition to underscore the necessity of human experience.

When one first reads "On Location in the Loire Valley," the poem reveals itself to have a formal structure. It is composed of ten stanzas, each of which is no more than two or three lines. In addition, each stanza ends with the two words, "our lives." Poets, more so than any other writers, often make sure that each of their words count. There is so little space in most poems as compared to longer works, that poets tend to be economical in their selection of words and phrases. The fact that Ackerman chooses to end each stanza with the same phrase is significant and shows that she planned this effect carefully. This careful planning is evident throughout the other poems in the collection. Ann van Buren in her review of the book for *Library Journal* writes "All of the poems reflect intelligence, awareness, and the skillful employment of rhyme, meter, alliteration, and other poetic techniques."

In the case of "On Location in the Loire Valley," this attention to detail is evident from the first two words in the title, "On Location." With these two words, one can ascertain that the speaker is on a film shoot. Since the film shoot, an event that requires using a lot of technology, is staged in the Loire Valley□a rural, relatively undeveloped countryside in France□Ackerman is using juxtaposition right from the start.

In the first stanza, the speaker jumps right in and describes her experiences on the film shoot. The first image is one of a Christmas scene. One can imagine a film scene in which the actors are gathering around Christmas trees that have mistletoe on them. As the speaker notes, although the poplars are decorated with ruin, they "enchant" the film crew with their natural beauty. Right away, Ackerman is juxtaposing life, represented by the natural tree and mistletoe, with death. This is the dominant juxtaposition in the poem, which runs as an undercurrent throughout the narrative that describes the speaker's experiences on the film shoot. For example, in the fifth stanza, the speaker

summarizes the film's narrative. One assumes that the film is a biography, which encapsulates the life of somebody within a short space of film time, just as Ackerman is encapsulating human life within the short space of her poem.

The film, and the process required to make it, have sparked the speaker's reflection on life and death. In some stanzas, the juxtaposition of life experiences and the inevitability of death is subtler. For example, in the second stanza, the speaker describes what it is like to film a scene in the cold, French castles. This stanza sets up an image of a group of actors who are freezing as they deliver their lines in the castle shoots. The word "decant" has a double meaning. In general, to decant means to pour something out. Decant can also mean to pour from one medium into another. In this case, the actors are pouring their lives, or life energy, into the film. People often talk of actors breathing life into a film. Ackerman is playing off this idea. Since a piece of film is inherently dead until something is recorded on it, the actors are literally giving the film life.

In addition to the juxtaposition of life and death, Ackerman also uses repetition. As noted above, each stanza ends with the phrase "our lives." It is tempting to view this repetition in a negative fashion. In most stanzas, the example ends with a dispassionate, and sometimes derogatory, commentary on human lives. For example, in the third stanza, "Soundmen record the silent rant of our lives." If humanity is just silently ranting, the poet seems to imply that it has no ultimate purpose. In another example, in the fifth stanza, the speaker says that, after the film shoot, "we adjourn to the constant of our lives." If human lives are constant, that implies that they are boring and monotonous. In other areas of the poem, "our lives" are dismantled. They are also described as "nonchalant" and full of "banter." These are not exactly positive descriptions of human experience. Ackerman seems to say that the human experience is, to a certain extent, a lonely one. A person can open himself or herself up to another human, but can never fully explain his or her life experience. This is why Ackerman notes that "The heart has a curfew," indicating that this restriction applies even to those in love.

With all of these negative descriptions, Ackerman seems to be saying that human lives are pointless and that humans live their lives out in a bunch of meaningless experiences, then die. Yet, Ackerman is more complex than this. As Taylor notes of the collection's praise of death "Psychologically ambiguous in their hintings at regret, these poems add another, more complex, more tantalizing, dimension to the resolve boldly expressed by Ackerman's title." If Ackerman is indeed trying to praise death in this poem, as she does in other poems in the collection, why does she try to make this point by using several negative examples?

To answer this question, one must look to the stanzas that open and close the poem. In the first stanza, Ackerman notes that even though the mistletoe and poplars will not live long, their impending death does "enchant our lives." This is a positive effect. After taking the reader through the eight middle stanzas, in which all of the human experiences she describes seem to have a negative undertone associated with death, the poet relents: "Not the shadow family we became, not the shiver beneath the smile, / not the people we clung to in the mad canter of our lives." Although this line is definitely "ambiguous," when it is juxtaposed with the rest of the poem, it seems as if the speaker

is trying to take comfort in the same human experiences that she has just disparaged. During the film shoot, she has "clung to" her colleagues, whom she refers to as her "shadow family." The fact that the speaker refers to her film crew as family, even a shadow one, is significant, and it underscores the main point that the poet is trying to make. The inevitability of death should cause people to cherish the life experiences that they do have. The speaker indicates that humans' lives pass by quickly and end in death. She is saying that people need to appreciate all of their experiences, even if they are bittersweet. In the end, human experiences are all that one may have.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "On Location in the Loire Valley," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Dillard discusses the themes and the passion behind Ackerman's poetry.

The work of Diane Ackerman in poetry and prose is a history of her extraordinary enthusiasms. Her memoirs recount her experiences on a cattle ranch (*Twilight of the Tenderfoot*) and in learning to fly (*On Extended Wings*), and, like her later books (*A Natural History of the Senses* and *A Natural History of Love*), they explore in depth and with intensity the full extent of the subject□its history, its detailed ins and outs, its poetry, and ultimately its meaning. She is a prodigious explorer of the world, if by "world" we mean, as she puts it, "the full sum of Creation." Her poetry is distinctive in finding its source in that same enthusiastic energy; she explores the world, inner and outer, with a scientist's poetic eye, recognizing, as the chaos scientist Mitchell Feigenbaum put it, that "art is a theory about the way the world looks to human beings."

Ackerman's book-length poems *The Planets: A Cosmic Pastoral* and *Reverse Thunder: A Dramatic Poem* are the most impressive results of her effort to draw scientific and poetic curiosity (and understanding) together into a unified field of electric language. The first is a long meditation on the planets in our solar system, and the second is a verse play about Juana Inés de la Cruz, a late seventeenth- century Mexican woman who actually lived Ackerman's ideal life as poet, scientist, and genuinely independent and creative thinker.

The Planets: A Cosmic Pastoral is a set of poetic explorations and meditations on the planets, Cape Canaveral, the asteroids, and even the blurry disappointment of the comet Kohoutek. In form and content it ranges widely and well□its science up-to-date and accurate and its poetry a display of dazzling wit. It roused Carl Sagan to say that it demonstrates "how closely compatible planetary exploration and poetry, science and art really are." It bridges the "two cultures" with a vigor and success not witnessed in English and American poetry since the eighteenth century, when Newton's *Opticks* and its implications excited poets and roused their imaginative responses.

At the end of *The Planets*, Ackerman returns to Earth "like a woman who, / waking too early each day, / finds it dark yet / and all the world asleep." This situation also sums up her dilemma as a poet, having pressed poetry into a service far beyond that of most of the poems of her contemporaries and now being faced with the choice of whether to join that sleeping world or to return to planetary exploration. In the poem she concludes, "But how could my clamorous heart / lie abed, knowing all of Creation / has been up for hours?"

Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz, the heroine of *Reverse Thunder*, faces that same dilemma and answers it in much the same way. She is tragically out of step with her place and time, but she triumphs in the work that she passes down to our time, when she finally can be (or almost can be) fully understood in all her complexity. This fascinating woman, as Ackerman pictures her, draws together in her life as a nun in seventeenth-century

Mexico almost all of the conflicting and contradictory strands of life at that time. She is a nun who loves a man passionately, a believing Christian who explores the scientific view of the world, a spiritual and spirited poet who draws her inspiration from both the life of the body and of the mind, and a materialist who comes to understand that matter is so much more than it appears to be:

If ever there was a good person in this world,
one just or pure or altruistic or visionary,
no matter who, or how many, or if only one,
then purity, or justice or mercy or vision,
is something of which matter is capable.
That paradox of the apparent indifference
of matter to such things as Good and Evil,
and, yet, at the same time, the reality
of its complete involvement:
that's why beauty stuns and touches us.

In her collection of short poems, *Wife of Light* and *Lady Faustus*, and in the fifty-two new poems in *Jaguar of Sweet Laughter: New and Selected Poems*, Ackerman apparently strives to write as Sister Juana would if she were writing today, recognizing no limits to the range of her interests or her voice. Whether she is being earthy, playing a bluesy "Menstrual Rag" or singing the true joy of sex with a metaphysical force, or diving under the sea, flying an airplane, brooding over rivers and bridges, confessing the depth of her love, or speculating about the very nature of thought, her wit runs a full range, exhibiting mind, memory, sense, the senses, sensuality, sanity, ingenuity, acumen, real thought, witty banter, and productive persiflage. Her enthusiasm carries her forward but never beyond the bounds of genuine feeling and serious understanding.

As she put it in the title poem of her collection *Lady Faustus*:

I itch all over. I rage to know
what beings like me, stymied by death
and leached by wonder, hug those campfires
night allows,
aching to know the fate of us all,
wall flowers in a waltz of stars.

Source: R. H. W. Dillard, "Ackerman, Diane," in *Contemporary Poets*, 7th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 2001, pp. 6-7.

Critical Essay #4

In the following review, Taylor discusses Ackerman's treatment of death and life in her collection I Praise My Destroyer.

I Praise My Destroyer faces up to death. As the title implies, plunging into the multivarious sensations of the quotidian is ultimately self-deceiving if one goes only halfway. Death cannot be ignored indefinitely while one is harvesting experience, however joyfully. For Diane Ackerman, death resembles a "horror lesson" noticed out of the corner of one's eye yet disbelieved until a cherished friend, family member or mentor□she commemorates Carl Sagan□suddenly passes away. Whence the increasing need, with age, to assimilate death into one's philosophy. Religious dogma of course offers pat solutions, but what about the agnostic whose only certitude is eschatological uncertainty? Confronting this dilemma with all the precision and enthusiasm for which her writings in the natural sciences have made her well known, Ackerman opts for exalting the organic processes whereby entities such as ourselves come into existence, exist, then perish.

The poet thereby praises "small daily marvels" as well as what ultimately destroys them (and us). Exalting life-in-death and death-in-life, she beckons us to "ransom each day," a courage-bolstering, even somewhat defiant, reinterpretation of Horace's "carpe diem." Death no longer looms so ominously □at least for a while, for in its purest formulation this metaphysical outlook could perhaps be maintained only by the strongest (or most insensitive) among us, not by the fragile.

This is where several gently erotic love poems come in. A few involve ephemeral affairs, thus entailing another kind of destruction. Within the metaphysics posited by Ackerman, these love poems show that we must come to terms not only with our demise, but also sometimes□and no less intensely □with the lover who fled "the love-brightened room for the tight, local orders of [his or her] life." We also die, perhaps even several times in the midst of life through amorous leave-takings and unrequited attractions. Psychologically ambiguous in their hintings at regret, these poems add another, more complex, more tantalizing, dimension to the resolve boldly expressed by Ackerman's title.

Ackerman weaves intricate, colorful, often stunning linguistic tapestries. Occasionally, self-indulgent declarations blur the focus ("darkest purple, a color . . . which I love because of its emotional ambiguity"); her exuberant yokings of nouns and unexpected adjectives can likewise divert from quieter, more meditative feelings; and for all the good intentions of her opening "School Prayer," one recalls Andre Gide's warning that "it is with noble sentiments that bad literature gets written."

Yet many poems illustrate admirably that "wonder" is truly her "job," and the ten concluding "Cantos Vaqueros" superbly balance Ackerman's irrespressible curiosity about the outside world□ here, cowboy life□with her desire to participate jubilantly in

such a world, as a poet. "For if I won't leap up / and ride, who will?" she asks. "Who will say / what marvel [this life] was swept by?"

Source: John Taylor, Review of *I Praise My Destroyer*, in *Poetry*, Vol. 173, No. 2, December 1998, p. 182.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, Alford discusses Ackerman's life and writings.

Diane Ackerman is one of the most highly acclaimed lyric poets writing in the United States. Her poetry displays a mastery of language, lexical precision, and a vast range of poetic forms and voices. A passionate, disciplined writer, Ackerman creates poetry full of wit, compassion, courage, and fact; it is a poetry of wonder and celebration for the natural world and the human condition. "Ackerman is not interested in a poetry of irony or theory or intellectual distance," notes reviewer Michael McFee. "Her poems are immediate . . . and accessible to anyone who has ever felt anything intensely" (National Public Radio, 7 July 1991). The fusion of science and art is one feature of Ackerman's poetry that makes her distinct from her contemporaries. To those who question the appropriateness or purpose of blending poetry with science, Ackerman replies: "Not to write about Nature in its widest sense, because quasars or corpuscles are not 'the proper realm of poetry,' as a critic once said to me, is not only irresponsible and philistine, it bankrupts the experience of living, it ignores much of life's fascination and variety. I'm a great fan of the Universe, which I take literally: as one. All of it interests me, and it interests me in detail" (*Contemporary Poets*, 1991). Ackerman stretches the boundaries of what poets traditionally write about, producing collections of verse that contain a rich variety of voices, moods, and subjects. Among her favorite sources of inspiration are nature, flying, astronomy, travel, and love.

Ackerman was born on October 7, 1948 in Waukegan, Illinois. Her father, Sam Fink, was a shoe salesman and later ran one of the first Mc- Donald's restaurant franchises. Her mother, Marsha Tischler Fink, "was□and is□a seasoned world traveler." In *The Moon by Whale Light* (1991), a collection of nature essays, Ackerman reflects on her childhood years and gives a humorous account of an incident that made her realize at a young age that she had poetic tendencies. As she and three schoolmates were walking through a plum orchard, "The trees were thick with plums," and she remarked that the dark plums were "huddled like bats." Her friends instantly recoiled. "The possibility of bats didn't frighten them," Ackerman recalls. "I frightened them: the elaborate fantasies I wove . . . ; my perverse insistence on drawing trees in colors other than green; my doing *boy* things like raising turtles. . . . And now this: plums that look like bats. . . . I remember flushing with wonder at the sight of my first metaphor□the living plums: the bats."

Her fascination with the natural world continued. In college, she studied science as well as literature. She began her undergraduate work in 1966 at Boston University but transferred to Pennsylvania State University the following year. She received her B.A. in English in 1970; then she entered Cornell University as a teaching assistant in 1971. At Cornell, Ackerman pursued academic studies for the next seven years, earning an M.F.A. in creative writing and an M.A. and Ph.D. in literature. She has taught writing at Cornell, Columbia, New York University, Washington University (in St. Louis, Missouri), the College of William and Mary, Ohio University and the University of Pittsburgh. At

Washington University she was director of the Writer's Program from 1984 to 1986. Currently she is a staff writer for the *New Yorker* and lives in upstate New York.

Many prestigious literary awards and honors have been presented to Ackerman throughout her career. At Cornell she was awarded the Academy of American Poets Prize, Corson French Prize, Heerman-McCalmons Playwriting Prize, and the Corson-Bishop Poetry Prize. Her other awards include the Abbie Copps Poetry Prize (1974), the *Black Warrior Review* Poetry Prize (1981), and the Pushcart Prize (1984). She has received grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1985 the Academy of American Poets honored her with the Peter I. B. Lavan Award. She received the Lowell Thomas Award in 1990. Ackerman has served as poetry judge in many poetry festivals and contests, on the board of directors for the Associated Writing Programs, and on the Planetary Society Advisory Board. In 1987 Ackerman was a judge in the AWP Award Series for Creative Nonfiction. She has also participated in several poetry panels, including those of the New York Foundation for the Arts (1987) and National Endowment for the Arts (1991).

Besides being a highly acclaimed poet, Ackerman is also a prose stylist. Her four books of nonfiction have been successful and have earned lavish praise from critics. Her first nonfiction book, *Twilight of the Tenderfoot* (1980), recounts her adventures at an authentic cattle ranch in New Mexico. Not content to rely on imagination, Ackerman left the quiet self-absorption of academia to experience the life of a cowhand. Her next work of prose, *On Extended Wings* (1985), is a memoir of her experiences as a student pilot. In a review of the book, Karen Rile wrote: "Diane Ackerman is a woman of letters, not numbers. When she gets her hands on the throttle, flying exceeds metaphor; it's the whole world; and yet nothing is mundane. This isn't simply a chronicle about learning how to fly; it's a poet's notebook with wings" (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 8 September 1985). *On Extended Wings* was adapted for the stage by Norma Jean Giffen in 1987. *A Natural History of the Senses* (1990) is Ackerman's third and most critically acclaimed work of prose to date. A surprise best-seller, it has since been published in sixteen countries. The paperback edition was released in 1991 by Vintage. This encyclopedia of the senses is an intriguing assortment of history, biology, anthropology, cultural fact, and folklore, woven together with poetic inspiration to celebrate the faculties of human perception. *The Senses*, a five-hour PBS series based on this book, is in development. Her latest prose work, *The Moon by Whale Light*, has been highly praised.

Ackerman's nonfiction is a creative blend of journalism, science, and poetry; indeed, it is her poetic vision that makes her nonfiction so successful. Adventurous and endlessly curious, she may assume different roles at different times□pilot, journalist, astronomer, horsewoman, scuba diver□but she is always a poet. Ackerman explains her writing as a form of "celebration or prayer," a way to "enquire about the world."

An obsession with astronomy led to her first full-length book of poetry, *The Planets: A Cosmic Pastoral* (1976). In this collection Ackerman travels the scenic route through the universe, as she tours the country of the Milky Way and the landscape of space. Earth's moon ("Imagine something that big being dead") and all the planets of the solar system

are explored in verse. Other subjects, such as comets and Cape Canaveral, are included as well.

Poetic imagery and metaphors interweave with scientific data. The planet Venus is described as "a buxom floozy with a pink boa; / mummy, whose black / sediment dessicates within; wasp star / to Mayan Galileos; / an outpatient / wrapped in postoperative gauze; / Cleopatra in high August□/ her flesh curling / in a heat mirage / light years / from Alexandria." Then, subtly, scientific fact creeps in among the rich poetic images: "Venus quietly mutates / in her ivory tower. / Deep within that / libidinous albedo / temperatures are hot enough to boil lead / pressures / 90 times more unyielding than Earth's." Later in the poem, readers also learn that Venus's atmosphere is forty miles thick and consists of sulphuric, hydrochloric, and hydrofluoric acids.

Although *The Planets* is liberally sprinkled with astronomical terms, phrases, and facts, the science does not distract but heightens reader interest and enhances the emotional value of the poems. Ackerman has the ability to take cold scientific fact and transform it into something fresh and poetic, compelling the reader to look at a thing in an exciting new way; her poetry intrigues, teaches, and delights at the same time. The overall feeling of *The Planets* is one of wonder and fascination. In the poem "Mars" a romantic, dreamy mood is created as the speaker bids her lover to fly with her to Utopia and the highlands of Tharis (regions on Mars):

Once in a blue sun, when volcanoes
heave up grit regular as pearls,
and light runs riot, we'll watch
the sun go darker than the sky,
violet dust-tufts wheel on the horizon,
amber cloudbanks pile, and the whole
of color-crazed Mars ignite.

Critics hailed *The Planets* as an impressive debut and important work. Astronomer Carl Sagan said, "The work is scientifically accurate and even a convenient introduction to modern ideas on the planets, but much more important, it is spectacularly good poetry, clear, lyrical and soaring. . . . One of the triumphs of Ackerman's pastoral is the demonstration of how closely compatible planetary exploration and poetry, science and art really are" (*New Republic*, November 1976).

Ackerman's next two books of poetry, *Wife of Light* (1978) and *Lady Faustus* (1983), are rich and varied collections of short poems. Ackerman's range of interests appears limitless. The title *Wife of Light* is taken from a line in her poem "Period Piece," in which she begs the moon for deliverance from the depths and rages of mood caused by her menstrual cycle. Wit mingles with misery:

Cares that daily fade or lie low
hogged front-row-center in the bleachers
of my despair and there, solemn
as Kewpie dolls, began to heckle and hoot.

The last line of the poem provides the title of the book: "Moon, be merciful to your wife of light."

Nature often produces a sensual quality in Ackerman's love poems. "Driving through Farm Country at Sunset," which is frequently anthologized, exudes this quality. At first the poem seems to be simply a tribute to nature, to "farm country," as the persona describes the sights, smells, and sounds of the rural area she is driving through: manure, cut grass, honeysuckle, washloads blowing on a line, dogwoods, a sunlit mountainside, and the samba of a dragonfly in the "puffy-lidded dusk." But images of nature are sensuously intertwined with tranquil images of domestic life to evoke a sense of longing. In the last stanza the reader becomes aware that it is a love poem:

Clouds begin to curdle overhead. And I want
to lie down with you in this boggy dirt,
our legs rubbing like locusts.'
I want you here with the scallions
sweet in the night air, to lie down with you
heavy in my arms, and take root.

Wife of Light displays Ackerman's tremendous range of interests and moods, and also her range of voices. Some of the voices are historical, as in the witty verse "Anne Donne to Her Husband" and the sonnet "Quixote" ("life's torpor is the blazing savanna of my loins"). Ackerman manages to turn even mathematics into poetry in "Song of ." She assumes the persona of (pi), the mathematical symbol that represents the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter. The ratio can be carried to an infinite number of decimal places it never rounds off and Ackerman focuses on this unusual feature: "I barrel / out past horizon's bluff, / every digit pacing like a Tennessee Walker, / unable to break even, / come round. . . ."

Lady Faustus, like *Wife of Light*, is broad in scope. Her romance with flying is one of the major sources of inspiration for the book. As a pilot, Ackerman experiences flight as a sort of rapture: "I am flight-luscious / I am kneeling on air" (from "Climbing Out"). Another pastime, scuba diving, provides inspiration for "A Fine, a Private Place." A man and woman make love underwater, "mask to mask, floating / with oceans of air between them, / she his sea-geisha / in an orange kimono / of belts and vests. . . ." The ocean is a "blue boudoir," and sunlight cuts through the water "twisting its knives into corridors of light." The same enthusiasm and sense of adventure that impel her to experience the sky and the sea also move her to explore and celebrate everyday marvels closer to home. Wild strawberries, a goddaughter, soccer, whale songs, rivers, dinosaurs, and language labs are a few of the marvels she captures in verse.

Concerning flying and scuba diving, Ackerman admits she is often drawn to pastimes that many people find frightening; however, she does not consider herself a daredevil, or even particularly daring. As she said to Jesse Green, "I'm not reckless. . . . I'd be a bad role model to younger women if I were. There are people who *like* to touch the fabric of immortality every chance they get. I'm not one. I don't take unnecessary chances. But I don't let a little bit of danger stand between me and knowledge either."

She also does not pursue danger for "cheap excitation." "For me," Ackerman writes in *Extended Wings*, "it's just a case of my curiosity leading with its chin: things fascinate me whether they are dangerous or not . . . [;] there are some things you can learn about the world only from 5,000 feet above it, just as there are some things you can learn about the ocean only when you become part of its intricate fathoms."

Ackerman's innate, intense curiosity propels her into experiences that provide subject matter for her poems. Sometimes curiosity itself is the topic. One example is "Lady Faustus." In the opening lines of the poem, curiosity is expressed as a live entity, a thing barely controlled: "Devils be ready! My curiosity / stalks the outpost of its caution. . . ." The intensity of her desire to know is compared to the sun's heat: "raw heat / fitful as a cautery / I, too, am burning with a lidless flame." Later, in *On Extended Wings*, Ackerman writes that her curiosity howls "like a caged dog." This image is originally found in the closing lines of "Lady Faustus":

A kennelled dog croons in my chest.
I itch all over. I rage to know
what beings like me, stymied by death
and leached by wonder, hug those campfires
night allows,
aching to know the fate of us all,
wallflowers in a waltz of stars.

Both *Wife of Light* and *Lady Faustus* were extolled by critics for their vision and poetic range: "Lyrical description is Ackerman's strong suit. Rich melodies, almost voluptuous with sound and image, her best poems and songs of celebration . . . stir and liberate all our best and kindest emotions" (*Publishers Weekly*, 29 July 1983).

Ackerman's next poetic work, published in 1988, is a long, dramatic poem, a play titled *Reverse Thunder*. She combines fact and fiction to portray the life of seventeenth-century nun Juana Inés de la Cruz, a remarkable woman and one of the bestknown Spanish poets of that century. In de la Cruz, Ackerman has found a kindred spirit□a passionate, creative woman, independent in thought and action, whose raging enthusiasm for life did not allow her to conform to a conventional role. As R. W. H. Dillard writes, "This fascinating woman, as Ackerman pictures her, draws together in her life as a nun in 17th-century Mexico almost all of the conflicting and contradictory strands of life in that time; she is a nun who loves a man passionately, a believing Christian who explores the scientific view of the world, a spiritual and spirited poet who draws her inspiration from both the life of the body and of the mind." Besides being a poet, Sister Juana was also a musician, painter, and scientist. She read in several languages and taught astronomy and philosophy, which were considered profane by the church. Her library was the largest in the New World.

In the preface to *Reverse Thunder*, Ackerman writes: "Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz was an extraordinary woman who had the bad fortune to live during an era which demanded its women to be ordinary. She was a child prodigy with a gift and passion for learning at

a time when education was not available to women." Such was the tragedy of Juana's life; the triumph is her poetry, which has survived the centuries to tell her story.

The philosophy in most of Ackerman's work is that the passions for life, learning, and love are intertwined and often one and the same. *Reverse Thunder* contains two themes that reflect this philosophy. The first theme involves passion for life itself. With a conviction reminiscent of Walt Whitman, she emphasizes the importance of the here and now: the joys and wonders of Earth are, at best, as sweet as heaven's. Juana says. "To know this world well, / there's Heaven in all its marvels," and "A worldly woman knows Heaven as the suburb of each day."

Another theme found in *Reverse Thunder* is the affirmation of the power of love. Juana discovers that love is greater than her passion for learning and, ultimately, her passion for life: "My world that seemed so rich before him, / once I knew him, / was not enough. / It changed from a most that lived / only on air to an orient of petals."

This passion for life and the affirmation of love's power resonate throughout Ackerman's poetry. Both themes are aptly expressed in a poem from *The Planets*, "When You Take Me from This Good Rich Soil," which reflects the same spirited convictions of Juana Inés de la Cruz, even though Ackerman wrote this poem many years before *Reverse Thunder*. The poem acknowledges the existence of heaven, but love is recognized as the greater power: "No heaven could please me as my love / does. . . . / When, deep in the cathedral of my ribs, / love rings like a chant, I need no heaven." Appreciation for the secular and a raging passion for life are expressed in the closing lines:

When you take me from this good rich soil,
and my heart rumbles like the chambers
of a gun to leave life's royal sweat
for your numb peace, I'll be dragging at Earth
With each cell's tiny ache, so you must
rattle my bone-house until the spirit breaks.

Ackerman's *Jaguar of Sweet Laughter: New and Selected Poems* was published in 1991. She has grown with each book, and this is her finest collection of poems to date, "a heady and generous bouquet of 15 years of Ackerman's poetry," according to McFee. In the new poems Ackerman's muse leads her from rain forest to iceberg, from her backyard to Mars, as she writes of hummingbirds, orchids, Halley's Comet, deer, contact lenses, penguins, pilots, and love. *Jaguar* is a lush collection that revels in the exotic: "Unleash me and I am an ocelot / all appetite and fur" (from "Dinner at the Waldorf").

Highlights of the book include lyric sequences about the Amazon and Antarctica. The book ripples with adventure and sensuality: "when you kiss me, / my mouth softens into scarlet feathers / an ibis with curved bill and small dark smile; / when you kiss me, / jaguars lope through my knees" (from "Beija-Flor"). As in previous collections, Ackerman's exceptional skill with voices is demonstrated. In "St. Louis Botanical

Gardens" a personified orchid, "the world's most pampered flower," describes the luxuriant existence of the orchid exhibit:

We dine
on the equivalent of larks' tongues
and chocolate. We are free
from that slum of hummingbird and drizzle.
Why bother with a mosquito's
languid toilet? Why bother
with the pooled vulgarity of the rain?

In a review of *Jaguar* Donna Seaman remarked, "Ackerman frees the exotic from the familiar, finds the familiar in the exotic, the large in the small, the personal in the vast" (*Booklist*, April 1, 1991). The corporeal is blended with the spiritual, the modern with the primitive, as Ackerman combines the poet's love of nature with a scientist's understanding of nature. "We Are Listening" is an excellent example. The "we" refers to humankind, listening with satellites and radios to the deep reaches of the universe, searching in "cosmic loneliness" for a sound, any sound. Ackerman interjects the creatural to emphasize the human feeling of insignificance as one faces the awesome silence and vastness of the universe:

Small as tree frogs
staking out one end
of the endless swamp,
we are listening
through the longest night
we imagine, which dawns
between the life and times of stars.

The modern spiritual struggle is reflected in this poem, as "radio telescopes / roll their heads, as if in anguish"; humankind is affectionately referred to as "the small bipeds / with the giant dreams."

In *Jaguar* Ackerman acknowledges in verse a few of the poets who influenced her writing: Wallace Stevens, Sylvia Plath, and Walt Whitman. Ackerman's lexical dexterity and precision frequently move critics to compare her to Stevens. In Wallace Stevens she says that, at nineteen, she desired Dylan Thomas's "voluptuousness of mind" and Stevens's "sensuous rigor." In another poem she expresses admiration for Plath's intellect, talent, and "naturalist's eye," but not for the pain that Plath "wore like a shroud." Ackerman refers to Plath as "the doll of insight we knew / to whom nearly all lady poets write, / a morbid Santa Claus who could die on cue." Of Plath's self-destruction Ackerman writes these chilling lines: "You wanted to unlock the weather system / in your cells, and one day you did." "Walt Whitman's Birthplace" recounts a metaphysical moment in which Ackerman draws inspiration from Whitman: "in an opera athletic as the land, / I drink from your source and swell as large as life."

Ackerman's unusual vision□the harmonious union of science and art□has made her a representative poetic voice of the twentieth century, a century in which science and technology have often separated people from nature and, thus, from themselves. In her poems, readers experience a reconnection with nature and an affirmation of life's glorious possibilities. George Garrett remarks (on the dust jacket of *Jaguar*) that "while a lot of fashionable poets have settled for a kind of whispering and mumbling in the monotonous dark, she has been making poems that can soar and sing, or talk straight and sure about interesting things, things that matter."

"Daring" is a word critics frequently apply to Ackerman and to her poetry because of her willingness to explore life and her refusal to shackle her writing to convention. Also, and perhaps more important, she has the courage to express passion and joyful exuberance for life at a time when intellectual distance and self-indulgent introspection is the vogue. In *Contemporary Poets* she states: "I try to give myself passionately, totally, to whatever I'm observing, with as much affectionate curiosity as I can muster, as a means to understanding a little better what being human is, and what it was like to have once been alive on the planet, how it felt in one's senses, passions and contemplations. I appear to have a lot of science in my work, I suppose, but I think of myself as a Nature writer, if what we mean by Nature is, as I've said, the full sum of Creation."

Poet, journalist, and prose stylist, Ackerman is a pioneer, exploring and opening fresh realms of thought for a new generation of poets, showing them that the only boundaries are ones they set for themselves. At the end of *The Planets*, she writes:

I return to Earth now
as if to a previous thought,
alien and out of place,
like a woman who,
waking too early each day,
finds it dark yet
and all the world asleep.
But how could my clamorous heart
lie abed, knowing all of Creation
has been up for hours?

Source: Julie Gleason Alford, "Diane Ackerman," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 120, *American Poets Since World War II, Third Series*, edited by R. S. Gwynn, Gale Research, 1992, pp. 3-9.

Topics for Further Study

Research the formation of the ghazal in the eighth century. Explain what life was like at that time in India and what importance, if any, was placed on poetry. Is poetry held in high esteem in India today?

Write a ghazal of your own, consisting of at least two couplets, following the standard rhyming formula. Then, write a ghazal in free verse couplets, making each couplet a complete expression of an idea.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of writing in a strict poetic form like a ghazal (or a sonnet or a villanelle)? Why do modern writers usually prefer free verse to traditional poetic forms? Cite some contemporary examples of poets who use traditional forms and poets who use free verse.

Based on your research, what place does poetry occupy in American cultural life today? Can poets and poetry influence society? Why or why not? Can you cite some examples?

What Do I Read Next?

Ackerman's *Jaguar of Sweet Laughter: New & Selected Poems* (1993) contains 118 poems that show her ability to dazzle the reader with her skill with words and ideas without sacrificing the need to be understood. The collection also reveals her celebrated ability to incorporate scientific concepts into her poems about the natural world and imbue them with a sense of curiosity and wonder.

In *Cultivating Delight: A Natural History of My Garden* (2002), Ackerman describes her garden in Ithaca, New York, through all the four seasons. She has her accustomed eye for small detail and writes in poetic prose that holds the reader's attention. In addition to the natural phenomena she describes so intricately, Ackerman is also effective in describing how the garden provides fuel for the human soul and spirit.

Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English (2000), edited by the late Agha Shahid Ali, is the first anthology of English-language ghazals. It contains work by well-known poets, including W. S. Merwin, and some newcomers. All the ghazals use the traditional refrain.

Daily Horoscope (1986) was poet Dana Gioia's first collection. He has a reputation as one of the finest of the new formalists, poets who use traditional forms of rhyme and meter.

Muhammad Daud Rahbar's *The Cup of Jamshid: A Collection of Original Ghazal Poetry* (1974), translated from Urdu by the author, contains ninety ghazals as well as an informative introduction.

The Lightning Should Have Fallen on Ghalib: Selected Poems of Ghalib (1999), edited by Robert Bly and translated by Sunil Dutta, is a loosely translated selection of thirty ghazals by one of India's finest poets.

Further Study

Ali, Agha Shahid, *The Country without a Post Office*, Norton, 1997.

This collection of poems contains three ghazals, two of which are original in English. They show what a traditional ghazal in English can be.

Gates, Barbara T., and Ann B. Shteir, "Interview with Diane Ackerman, 18 July 1994," in *Natural Eloquence: Women Reinscribe Science*, edited by Barbara T. Gates and Ann B. Shteir, University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, pp. 255-64.

In this interview, Ackerman talks mainly about her nonfiction work rather than her poetry, especially *A Natural History of the Senses*, as well as *A Natural History of Love*.

Randhir, L. C., *Ghazal: The Beauty Eternal*, Milind Publications Private, 1982.

This is a thorough analysis of the ghazal form in Urdu (English translations are supplied). It explains the technical requirements of the form, its predominant imagery and themes, and its relationship with Indian music.

Rich, Adrienne, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems 1950- 2001*, W. W. Norton, 2002.

This volume includes thirteen ghazals, collectively entitled "Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib," written in unrhymed, discontinuous couplets. The evocative images, pithiness of thought, and occasional modern American idioms found in these poems create memorable English ghazals.

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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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