Pine Study Guide

Pine by Kimiko Hahn

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Contents

Pine Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Plot Summary....5

Themes....8

Style....10

Historical Context....12

Critical Overview....15

Criticism....17

Critical Essay #1....18

Critical Essay #2....21

Critical Essay #3....25

Topics for Further Study....29

What Do I Read Next?....30

Further Study....32

Bibliography....33

Copyright Information....34

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Introduction

□Pine□ is a beautiful example of the work of the award-winning poet Kimiko Hahn and reflects her mixed cultural Japanese American background. The poem is as delicate and subtle as a Japanese painting. It is as sensual as Hahn's own favorite literature, the poetry of Japanese women of the Heian era court, and it is as accessible as any modern American narrative poem. With just the right number of allusions and images, Hahn gently taps her audience on their shoulders and encourages them (as well as her fictitious student audience) to work harder, to dig deeper into their souls in order to tap a creative source that not only will help them understand their emotions but also will assist them in creating a piece of work that will move their future as readers. It is a poem about writing poetry as well as a poem of sensual delights.

Hahn's poem was published in 1999 in her collection *Mosquito and Ant*. The title of this book refers to a form of writing used long ago by Asian women. Hahn's writing is also influenced by the traditional Japanese poetry called *tanka*□a system used by Japanese women in ancient times to relate their emotions to one another, usually following an evening encounter with their lovers.

In □Pine,□ Hahn uses the title word in two ways. In indicating a pine tree, a popular symbol in Japanese literature, culture, and lore, Hahn makes reference to strength and endurance, encouraging her audience to suffer through the hardships they may encounter as they struggle to write poetry and to draw on those challenges to bring their inner feelings to full light. But she also uses □pine□ in another way, a more American manner. In the English language, □pine□ can be a verb. To pine for something is to long for it, to sulk, to brood. In other words, the subject of this poem is the emotions. The speaker of the poem wants to feel emotions, and she encourages young poets in the poem's last line: □So prick my skin.□

Author Biography

Ethnicity: Asian-American

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1955

Kimiko Hahn, an award-winning poet, was born in 1955 in Mount Kisco, New York. Her mother, of Japanese ancestry and born in Hawaii, and her father, of German ancestry and born in Wisconsin, were both artists. When Hahn was ready for college, she enrolled at the University of Iowa, where she decided upon a double major in English and East Asian studies. Upon graduation, she was accepted at Columbia University and eventually received a master's degree in Japanese literature.

Hahn's first book, written in collaboration with her fellow poets Gale Jackson and Susan Sherman, was published in 1988 as *We Stand Our Ground*. In this work, Hahn and her coauthors explore the challenges of finding a common ground among people with differing ethnic backgrounds. Hahn states that she leans more toward her mother's Japanese background and has spent most of her adult life exploring Japanese culture, language, and literature. Her mother's heritage is not the only thing that influences Hahn's writing. Her mother suffered an accidental death, and Hahn often explores this circumstance in her poetry.

Besides reflecting on the loss of her mother and the effect it has had on her own children, Hahn also takes up other themes, including the relationships between men and women and topics that deal with the body and desire and with the use of language. Of particular interest to Hahn are the lives of women, which are common subjects of her writing. She is also especially fond of women writers of ancient Japanese times.

Hahn has written six collections of poetry: *Air Pocket* (1989); *Earshot* (1992), which won the Theodore Roethke Memorial Poetry Prize and the Association of Asian America Studies Literature Award; *The Unbearable Heart* (1995), which received an American Book Award; *Volatile* (1999); *Mosquito and Ant* (1999), in which "Pine" appears; and *The Artist's Daughter* (2002). Besides winning specific awards for particular publications, Hahn has also received awards for her work in general. Such prizes include the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writer's Award and fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. Included in her list of credits is a television script, *Ain't Nuthin' but a She-Thing*, written in 1995 for a special two-hour presentation for HBO. The television production included brief portraits of ten women.

Hahn has been an associate professor in the English department at Queens College (CUNY). Previously, she was an editor for the magazine *Bridge: Asian-American Perspectives*.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

In □Pine,□ the first word of the first stanza is the pronoun *I*. Each stanza thereafter starts with either *I* or *you*. In setting up this pattern of address, Hahn develops the sense of writing a letter, one of the characteristics of the Japanese poetic form called tanka. This brings a certain intimacy to the poem, and thus Hahn draws her readers into her poetry. Whether readers consider themselves the third party witness to the communication or, even more intimately, see themselves, by the use of the pronoun *you*, as the person intended, Hahn accomplishes her mission of connecting with her audience.

In the second line of the first stanza, Hahn brings out another element of the tanka□emotion. The second line ends with □longing.□ By placing □longing□ at the end of this line, Hahn emphasizes the emotion. Then, in the third line, she connects □longing□ with □of the pine.□ Is there longing in a pine tree? Or is the poet using the pine tree to represent something else? One possible interpretation an American audience might make stems from the double meaning of □pine.□ Thus, the alternate meaning of □pine□ further accentuates □longing.□ □Pine□ refers to a Japanese motif. The pine tree, often used in Japanese writing and also in Japanese painting, stands for endurance. Thus the longing that Hahn has introduced, which is later emphasized with the pine, could signify either that the speaker is enduring the longing or possibly that the longing itself is enduring, or everlasting. It is not clear whether the poet wants to focus on the depth of the longing or rather the continuing effect of it, but the next couple of lines add more detail to this concept. Here, the speaker introduces the pronoun *it*. She does not explain what □it□ refers to. Is it the longing or the pine tree or the dress? Whatever it is, it □retains its scent,□ but the scent of what? The obvious answer would be the scent of the pine. So the reader must ask what the scent of the pine represents in this poem. And the only possible answer is □the longing.□ In this way the first stanza comes back to where it began. To emphasize this circular motion, Hahn adds, at the very end of the stanza, □That's what I thought,□ repeating a similar phrase that appeared in the first line of the poem.

These last words of the first stanza are complex, though they at first appear simplistic. Even though the last phrase of this stanza is similar to the first phrase, the feeling of each is very different. In the beginning, it seems as if Hahn is stating a fact. At the end, however, we are not so sure. The speaker is no longer confident that what she □thought□ was correct. The difference between the beginning and the ending is that in the middle something has happened. The speaker originally thought the wearing of the green dress □might be enough,□ but after wearing the dress, perhaps she discovered it was not enough. With this thought, Hahn leads her readers into the next stanza.

Stanza 2

If the speaker is questioning her own ability to express her longing in the first stanza, she definitely is questioning her students' ability in the second stanza. She has concern for their writing. She wants her students to express their longing, their emotions. Instead, she is seeing in their poems anything but their true feelings. They misread her prodding of them to open up to their emotions, and they produce instead inflamed poems. But these poems are not about their real selves. Rather they are poems written to please her.

After the first three lines of this second stanza, the poet changes direction abruptly. From her concerns about her students, she turns to a personal image. This change appears to be detached from the previous lines. However, if the reader takes into account that the teacher/speaker is searching for a way to get her students to write more eloquently about themselves, it could be that she is trying to demonstrate how to do this. She provides a very vivid image through which the reader not only sees the picture the speaker is painting but also can feel the emotion behind it. I lay awake, the speaker states. Readers should question what is keeping her awake. She also lies in the neighbor's light, from which could be inferred that she has gone to bed early, at least before her neighbors have gone to bed. There is something going on inside the speaker, which Hahn expresses very simply. But the emotions she is putting across are not so simple. In not blurting out the details exactly, the speaker again draws in her reader, forcing them to come to their own conclusions. This is exactly the kind of writing the speaker wants her students to compose.

Stanzas 3-7

In the next five stanzas, some of them only one phrase long, the poem is dominated by comments directed not at the speaker's students but at the anonymous you, who appears to be a person who is critiquing the speaker, helping her look at her own work in the same way that she looks at her students' writing. The message to be more specific is one of the directives that comes through in the fourth stanza. This is something that almost all writing teachers tell their students.

At the end of the fourth stanza, the poet brings her readers back to the opening premise, mentioning the needle, which is reminiscent of both the pine tree and the prodding of her students. Make me feel, the speaker states. It is not clear if this statement is directed to the lover, the *John* in the previous lines, or if the speaker is still enticing her students to create poems that move her; perhaps it is the speaker talking to herself about her own writing. Nonetheless, with this line, the speaker also returns to the way in which she creates feeling in a poem. In the fifth stanza, she demonstrates how to use words so profoundly and yet so simply that her readers feel what she wants them to feel. First she reminds the reader of the beginning of the poem. She does this by mentioning a dress again; this time, however, the dress is not a cool green but a more blazing red. The emotions are getting hotter. She then describes

materials that most readers can relate to for their softness, silkiness, and smoothness□all sensual textures. In case readers are not familiar with silk, rayon, and chiffon, she provides yet another sensual image□that of a smooth lotion, light □on the nape of your neck.□ Finally, in stanza 7, she adds the word □*heat*,□ to make sure everyone understands where she is going.

Stanza 8

Hahn ends her poem by discussing her knowledge of feelings. She is getting closer to identifying them, but she still only sees them. She is not feeling them. With her closing line, she addresses someone, but the person's identity is not clear. It may be the person to whom she is writing the poem. It may be her lover. It may be her students. Or it may be that she is writing to her muse. What is clear is that she is waiting for someone or something to make her feel an emotion. And she has no problem vividly requesting it with her last words: □So prick my skin.□

Themes

Longing

The speaker of this poem mentions several ways in which she experiences longing. Although it is not always clear what she is longing for, woven throughout this poem, including in its title, is a sense that something is missing in her life. In the beginning, she dresses in a manner that she hopes will express her longing. In the following section, she longs for her students to write poems that communicate their deep-seated needs. At the same time, she is also brooding over the fact that she is having trouble teaching her students how to bring out their emotions in a satisfying way through their writing. Also, in the second stanza, the speaker mentions a letter she has received from some unnamed lover, who is also filled with a strong sense of yearning.

While the speaker as teacher tries to find a way to bring out the best writing in her students, she also longs to improve her own writing. Someone in her audience (she may be writing to another poet, but this is not clear) is needling her to improve her style of writing, to express her longing in a more specific way. By the end of the poem, the speaker states that she can see the feeling. Although this is not the actual longing in and of itself, at least the speaker has acknowledged it. It is not obvious, however, whether she is referring to her own longing or that of her students. This is not ultimately important, as the theme of longing is present throughout the poem no matter whose longing it is.

Teaching Poetry

Whether the speaker is talking to herself or to her students, winding through this poem is the theme of teaching someone to write better poetry. The speaker mentions that she needles her students to prod them to reach down into their feelings and to express those feelings in their work. At the same time, she appears also to be teaching or reminding herself to do the same. She wants to needle her students, but she also wants someone to needle her. She wants to find ways of bringing out the emotion of an event without overwhelming the reader. She also wants her students to find the things in their lives that matter to them and not write what they think she wants them to write. The more she talks about her desire that the students learn how to write poetry, the more it seems apparent that the speaker also wants, or needs, someone to teach her how to write better poetry. At some points in the poem, it appears that the speaker has decided that instead of telling the students how to write better poems, she (and thus the teacher inside her) might demonstrate what a good poem sounds like by teaching herself how to write one as well.

Emotions

Longing is one of the main emotions expressed in this poem, but Hahn conveys several other emotions. There are the emotions that are retained in memory, as the speaker refers to the scent of the pine in a snowfall. Emotions are felt, the speaker states, not only in the moment but also in memory, when something like a snowfall reminds you of an earlier snowfall and all the feelings that are associated with it. In the same stanza, the speaker reflects on the emotions that arise with self-doubt, when she repeats the phrase □That's what I thought.□ This is a fearful emotion. What if what she had thought previously was not true? What if what she had done was for naught?

There is another somewhat fearful emotion in the second stanza, or at least a feeling of frustration. The speaker refers to herself as a teacher, but she is having trouble getting through to her students. This raises the issue of how good a teacher she is if she cannot teach them how to write better poetry. Next, Hahn looks at the issue of judging her own poetry. Maybe her writing is not that good. She prods the students, she states, but she also questions whether that is working. Maybe she should be prodding herself, too.

The speaker wants to feel emotions, and she wants her students to feel them, but she also wants her students' poetry to make her feel her students' emotions. The poem is one big cycle of emotions. The speaker goes on to engage emotions other than longing. She wants to earn money from her poetry so that she can buy gifts for her unnamed friend. She wants to give her friend enjoyment. She wants her friend to feel good about herself, to pamper herself, to bring herself alive with sensual pleasures. In other words, she wants her friend to feel more emotion.

In the seventh stanza, there is a curious statement that could be read as loneliness: □You say it's the *he* in *heat*,□ the line reads. Does this mean that a woman needs a man in order to find emotion? The line could also be read as another type of frustration. Or it could be an admonishment of some kind□one woman reminding another that a person alone is not limited to an unemotional life, that emotion can be found without having a man in one's life. Whichever way the line is read, □*heat*□ is a reference to passion, another word for emotion. In the final stanza, the speaker seems to be confirming the idea that a woman, or any person alone, can experience feelings. The speaker steps out into the forest barefoot and is no longer just looking at feelings; she is experiencing them herself.

Style

Tanka in English

Translating the tanka form of poetry into English can be very challenging because of the difference not only in the shape of the two different languages (English, which is based on individual letters and emphasized syllables, and Japanese, which is based on syllables and no stress) but also in the way both languages express images. Japanese poets are very subtle when creating metaphors. In Japanese, for example, metaphors are placed in a poem, and the reader, accustomed to their meaning, assumes the correct interpretation. Because of these and other differences in language, writing tanka-inspired poems in English results in the rules being eased. So in the Hahn poem "Pine," there is no strict adherence to the shape of the poem. Hahn's poem is short, and the language is rather simple, but the form is free. There is no strict counting of syllables, for example, as there is in the Japanese form. However, Hahn does demonstrate the influence of the Japanese tanka in other ways.

One facet of tanka that can be adapted to English is the Japanese love of wordplay. In Hahn's poem, the author uses "pine" to mean two different things. "Pine" can describe a tree or it can be a verb meaning "to long for." Although the Japanese language allows for much more complexity of wordplay than English, poets of the English language can find ways to enjoy this game as well. Hahn also often refers to a "needle" in this poem. This word harkens back to the pine tree, but it is also used in its verbal form, meaning "to pester or to provoke."

Another aspect of tanka poetry that is easily translated into English is the expression of emotion. Many tanka poems reveal a sadness, one of the stronger emotions used in poetry. Although the poetic form is brief, tanka, in its simplicity, is a good vehicle for expressing strong emotions. This is the whole premise of Hahn's poem. She knows that a reader must feel something while reading the poem. For the reader to feel, the poem must be infused with emotion. This does not mean that one must write melodramatically, but rather that one must select one's words carefully and simply, as the tanka form requires, and also choose the deepest feelings beneath these words.

Hahn also employs the tanka technique of using the last line of a stanza to reflect the first line. In the first stanza, Hahn begins with "I thought." Then, at the end of the stanza, the last words are the same: "I thought." Not only does this technique emphasize a circular closure, it also brings forth a deeper understanding. In the beginning, this phrase appears as a reflection, but at the end, it calls up a questioning attitude. The speaker is second-guessing herself. Hahn also repeats the concept of being needled or of needling someone throughout her poem. This ties the various stanzas together and keeps the idea of the pine alive from beginning to end.

Entwining Subjects

Hahn's poem covers two subjects at once. These subjects are related on some levels but on the surface they appear very different. The speaker begins with a generalized statement about feelings, as if she were talking about a personal affair. In the second stanza, she refers to her students, whom she is prompting to infuse their writing with more emotion. It is the emotions that are apparent in both stanzas. But the audience in the first stanza seems to be more personal, while the audience in the second is the speaker's classroom filled with students. The rest of the poem is also more personal. The speaker attempts to explain how she deals with her emotions, as if she is writing to a friend about a love affair. By writing in this way, rather than telling her students how to write about emotions, the speaker is showing her students through the example of her own writing. Thus, the topic of emotions is elucidated in two different ways.

Sensuality

A key element in this poem is sensuality. In the first stanza, the speaker refers to the scent of the pine, a scent that every reader will know. It is the perfume of a freshly cut Christmas tree. After calling up the sense of smell, the speaker brings in the sense of touch. She mentions the pine needles, another familiar tactile memory. Who has not been pricked by pointed evergreen needles? So now the speaker has brought two strong, sensually charged images into her poem. To enhance the poem visually, she adds a flurry of snowflakes. Snowstorms are magical images and spark the imagination and the senses. Then the speaker arouses hearing in the second stanza: □the spruce / scraping at their windows.□ More tactile images appear, including □fingers□ that □are cold□ and the soft touch of □lotion / on the nape of your neck.□ She also adds the slithery feel of □silk, rayon, chiffon,□ all very smooth materials that most women will relate to. Finally, the speaker takes the reader outside and walks barefoot on a blanket of pine needles, a tickly situation that connects the body to the earth and joins the reader to the poem.

Historical Context

Japanese Tanka Poetry

Hahn has stated that her own writing is heavily influenced by the ancient Japanese poetic form called tanka. This form is more than one thousand years old and became very popular, especially with women who lived courtly lives during the Heian period (794-1185). Tanka has a set pattern (that is often revised) of syllables per line. The pattern follows a 5-7-5-7-7 scheme and has often been credited as the forerunner of the more popular poetic form haiku. The Japanese language is syllabic (as opposed to English, which is broken down into individual, single letters) and more easily fits the simple pattern of tanka. However, in recent years, tanka has become a very attractive style of writing English-language poems.

Tanka poems were popular with courtly women, who often were kept in solitude. It was through tanka that they expressed deep emotions, giving them psychological outlets for the aftereffects of love affairs, failed as well as romanticized. At one point, writing tanka was even turned into a game, with one person writing the first three lines of the poem and someone else completing the form. Tanka was not restricted to love affairs, however. Any topic that elicited strong emotions was used, including a love of nature, of one's family, or of an especially beautiful place. Unlike English poetry, rhyming and meter are not aspects of tanka, owing to the fact that all but a minimum of Japanese syllables end in vowels, thus giving the language a natural rhyming sound no matter what words are used. Also, because of a lack of accented syllables in the Japanese language, there is no sense of rhythm inherent in Japanese poetry. The basic premise for Japanese poetry, therefore, is conveying images. Poems offer a simple and often beautiful scene or, in the case of many tanka poems, a strong emotion.

Since tanka was a poetic form used by women in the Japanese court, the subject matter was elevated, reflecting higher ideals and concepts than the base or mundane topics of daily life. The language used was often simple, however, thus not becoming a distraction from the simple and pure beauty of the image that the poem presented. One would not discuss vulgar topics, for instance, or use vulgar language.

Ono no Komachi is one of the more famous and legendary female tanka poetesses of the Heian court. Several of her tanka poems have been preserved, and elements of her life have been immortalized in many Japanese Noh plays. According to legend, Komachi was unbelievably beautiful and was capable of casting romantic spells on men. As the story goes, one such lover was admonished by Komachi to wait outside her quarters for one hundred days before she would see him. However, this young man died on the one-hundredth day, and afterward Komachi was cursed. She lost her beauty and lived the rest of her days as a wretchedly poor old woman. Another Noh play, however, releases her from this curse; her powers return, and she bewitches yet another young man with her romantic spell.

Tanka Poetry in the United States

Many poets in the United States have turned to the study and appreciation of tanka poetry, both in translation and as a creative style through which to write poems. In attempts to create tanka in English during the early 1960s, a strict adherence to the basic form of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables per poem was followed. But since then, a freer form, often called free verse, has been used, with twelve to more than thirty syllables; sometimes these syllables are arranged in five lines. Even these parameters are often ignored. Today, English-language tanka continues to find its own shape. The major emphasis that remains intact from the original Japanese format is that the poems are short and continue to provide emotionally charged images.

Many magazines feature tanka, as do online groups, college courses, and annual contests dedicated to this type of poetic writing. For example, the Mirrors International Tanka Award contest first began collecting entries and providing prizes in 1990. One of the prominent judges of this contest is Jane Reichhold, a scholar and translator of Japanese tanka verse. The online publication *American Tanka* has been produced since 1996, showcasing some of the best English versions of this type of poetry. Online, one can also find several sites created by elementary and high school classes that discuss and demonstrate the writing of English-style tanka. The International Tanka Contest, first held in 1999, judges the best tanka in Japanese and in English. The originator of this contest, Mutsuo Shukuya, has stated that he was inspired to create this contest after hearing Japan's prime minister express a need for Japanese people to reach out to the rest of the world and share a mutual understanding of cultures. The Tanka Society of America, formed in 2000, is a nonprofit organization with the goal of promoting the understanding and appreciation of tanka poetry, in all its various forms.

Teaching Creative Writing

It was not always believed that creative writing was something that could be taught. Critics insisted that either a person was born with the talent or not. Although there were classes that focused on the teaching of writing, they were concentrated on more practical genres, not on fiction or poetry.

About seventy years ago, however, college administrators decided that writing classes in poetry and fiction might have a beneficial effect on students, so published authors of poetry and fiction were invited to various schools, where they offered lectures. Amherst, for instance, asked Robert Frost to take on the role of poet in residence, one of the first schools to do so. In 1931, the New School in New York City initiated a writing program, led by the famed Manhattan editor Gorham Munson. In 1938, the University of Iowa began what today has evolved into one of the country's most famous creative writing programs. The idea was similar to Amherst's: invite published writers to teach courses to budding writers. Some of the more famous of the first teachers to do so at the University of Iowa included the poet Robert Penn Warren and the short-story writer Flannery O'Conner.

The concept of a master of fine arts degree in writing took longer to develop, but by 1975 there were more than a dozen schools offering this degree, which focuses on writing fiction and poetry. According to a recent report, that number has increased by almost nine times, and programs include the writing of creative nonfiction. Although the idea that creative writing cannot be taught continues to persist today and there is a rising level of criticism against such programs as master of fine arts programs, both creative writing in colleges and writing workshops for the general public keep growing in popularity across the United States.

Critical Overview

Hahn's “Pine” has not yet been singled out for specific critical appraisal, but her collections of poetry have attracted the attention of reviewers. Overall, her poetry, which has been published in many literary magazines in addition to being collected in her own publications, has moved her readers to the point at which they find they must use words such as “powerful,” “beautiful,” “emotional,” and “breathtaking” to describe her work.

In a *Publishers Weekly* review of the collection *Mosquito and Ant*, in which the poem “Pine” appears, the critic begins the article with the sentence: “Bold, brave and sharp, Hahn's fourth and fifth books . . . are large in the range of their concerns and the intensity of their passions.” This reviewer comments on the influence of Japanese poetry on Hahn's work and compliments the sharpness and tightness of her writing. The subject matter of Hahn's work, this reviewer finds, is the concern of women, and this does not exclude topics considered political. In further remarks, this critic writes that Hahn's poetry uses “visceral sexuality” to help ground the poetic abstractions encountered in her writing in “concerns” that are “concrete.” Comparing Hahn's work to another ancient type of Japanese writing, a form referred to as *zuihitsu*, the critic adds that Hahn brings her writing alive and creates a “tighter, more fully realized work” and thus creates a place “where women write to each other in charged, clandestine code.”

Reviewing an earlier collection of Hahn's work, *The Unbearable Heart*, in *Booklist*, the critic Elizabeth Millard finds this book, whose poetry focuses on the death of the author's mother, not to be morbid or melodramatic but rather filled with “dark beauty.” Hahn has a way of taking her readers to very sensitive places, this reviewer stated, without making them feel overwhelmed with misery. “Virtually every line,” Millard writes, “contains a breathtaking disclosure.” Although Millard refers to the poems in this collection as “raw,” she adds such praiseworthy adjectives to her description as “powerful” and “utterly radiant.” In conclusion, Millard tells her readers that this Hahn collection “should not be missed.”

Hahn's collection *The Artist's Daughter* likewise has received praise from critics. The *Library Journal*'s Ellen Kaufman writes that, despite the gruesome subject matter of several of the poems in this collection, topics that include cannibalism and cadavers, Hahn has a talent that is able to produce “music” in her writing and does so through what Kaufman refers to as “the shapely statement.” Although Kaufman faults the poetess for some “choppy, fragmented lines” and relationships that appear “forced,” overall, she recommends this collection to her readers.

Finally, there is Laura Rosenthal's review for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. She also read Hahn's *Mosquito and Ant* and opens her critical analysis by discussing other reviewers' comments concerning the topics of Hahn's more recent poetry. Many of these reviewers have referred to Hahn's poems as placing an emphasis on subjects that pertain to people who are middle aged. Rosenthal finds no problem with this, since it

reflects Hahn's life experiences and does not otherwise negatively influence her writing. Rosenthal enjoys Hahn's insights, which could have been gained only from an older person's perspective. Rosenthal also points out Hahn's connection to the Heian poetesses of Japan, whose practice of writing in poetic form to other women Hahn emulates. Many of the poems in this collection, Rosenthal discovers, are very similar to those of this ancient poetic tradition. In this way, Hahn demonstrates her investment in her mother's culture, through which the poet explores her role as an artist and reflects on her experiences as a wife, a mother, and a daughter.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Hart is a published author and freelance writer. In the following essay, Hart explores Hahn's poem to see if the poet practices what she preaches by infusing her writing with a sensual texture that Hahn's audience can not only see but also feel.

In her poem □Pine,□ Hahn starts right at the title to provide her readers with a few hints not only as to what this poem is about but also how it was put together. The title demonstrates that there will be a mention of nature, for instance, but looked at more closely, there will also be double meanings applied throughout. If just the surface of the poem is skimmed, readers might make quick judgments about the subject matter. Words like □pine,□ □evergreen,□ and □tree line,□ all mentioned in the first few lines, make this poem appear to be about nature. In part, this is true. This poem is not just about the nature of the earth, however; it is about human nature, too. Even more than that, it is about how nature and human nature can come together in a poem. Hahn's poem □Pine□ is about many things, including poetry itself, and that is why this short piece of literature becomes more and more intriguing with every new reading.

On one level, the speaker of this poem appears to have one clear goal□to teach her students how to write poems that are steeped in emotion. The speaker, as teacher, seeks subtle expressions, and she seems frustrated when her students turn in work that does not meet her goals. She cannot get her students to dig into their own psyches and from there allow words to rise naturally from their own experience, words that are rich in intriguing and compelling drama. Instead, her students want to please her. They try to guess what she wants, or they try to emulate her by digesting her beliefs and then spitting them back at her. In this way, they end up writing poems that are focused on frivolous things like the speaker's ankle bracelet. She needles them, pushes them, maybe even screams and hollers at them: Wake up! Find your own feelings! Don't try to borrow mine!

It appears that in her yelling at them, the speaker herself is stirred. The form of this poem resembles a letter to a friend, similar to the traditional Japanese poetic standard, the tanka. In ancient times, women wrote tanka poems to one another. Even though Hahn's poem appears to be a letter to someone else, often people write to friends in order to expose their thoughts to themselves. Sometimes in telling someone else what one is thinking, one gains insight into one's own life. Hahn could have created this poem in an attempt to overcome a blockage in her own writing. She might be asking herself the same question that she has asked her students: Am I also staying on the surface of things? In writing about wearing a green dress, she realizes that it might not have been a very succinct way of expressing her emotions, even though she had hoped it would be enough. Yes, the dress might be as green as a pine, but the jump across the chasm between her emotions and the wearing of a green dress is quite a wide distance. The speaker probably senses this, because she questions the significance of the dress by the end of the first stanza. She is pining, she tells her readers, but perhaps no one has been able to read her signals. Surely the wearing of green is interesting, but the symbol of the dress is on her□on the surface of things. In other words, the speaker, in wearing

the dress, has not opened up fully enough for her emotions to be completely understood, to be laid out in a clear and undeniable exposure. Rather than revealing her true emotions, her wearing of the dress is only a hint at what lies underneath. The speaker could be hiding her emotions and therefore is as guilty as her students are in writing on the surface.

When the speaker realizes that the dress does not properly express her feelings, she goes deeper. Just as she needles her students, poking them with something sharp and penetrating to awaken them, she also needles herself. She dives into her inner thoughts and discovers the source of her emotions. It is possible that the evergreen dress was the first hint that she needed to express her feelings. The evergreen color reminded her of the pine tree, and the pine tree reminded her that she was longing/pining for something. So she tries again. With each succeeding line and stanza, she comes closer not only to understanding the exact emotion that she is feeling but also to writing a better poem.

To take their attention from her ankle bracelet and turn it back onto their own inner lives, the speaker exposes something more personal about herself. She offers them an example, by confessing that she has been unable to sleep. She does this with some of the most simple and beautiful lyrics in the entire poem. Who cannot relate to the wonder of a "curtain" of snow flurries? What child has not pressed his or her nose to the cold windowpane and stared at the transformation that a snowstorm can invoke? The speaker reverts to this childlike state to rediscover the "real morning" / the one with real light." As adults, people tend to cover over their emotions with superficial things. They have learned to hide their feelings. They have been told that it is not right to express oneself with such honesty. But young children have no such fears or barriers; they tend to see things for what they are. They have not yet collected the "compost" that the speaker refers to in the next lines. They have no garbage building up around their emotions; their emotions are raw and true. That is what the speaker/teacher/poet is looking for in her writing as well as in that of her students. Strip yourselves of the garbage you carry around with you and see your lives for what they really are, the speaker is saying. Listen not to my words and try to repeat them; listen not to my beliefs and try to replicate them. She tells her students to listen instead to "the spruce / scraping at their windows." In other words, she says, listen to the sounds and watch the events that are occurring all around you. Listen to your own inner voice, and write about the things that make you cry, make you laugh, make you feel good about your life.

The lines at the end of the second stanza are a little difficult to understand. "Still / X sends terrifying love letters / that send so much blood to the chest / the fingers are cold." The speaker appears to be addressing the friend to whom she is writing. The word "terrifying" makes this statement a little frightening. It is possible that in her effort to awaken emotion in one of her students, she has aroused a beast, and maybe she must now tame that beast. After all, too much emotion can be just as bad as too little. Then, in the next short stanza, it appears that the speaker's friend, the one to whom she is writing, has tempered the speaker's fears, telling her that the student the speaker refers to as "X" just has a crush on her. This is possibly the consequence of the speaker's having exposed her emotions to the class. The warning here seems to be that

there is a price to be paid by letting others know one's inner thoughts, but this does not inhibit the speaker's expression. In fact, the □terrifying love letter□ seems to encourage her. □I needle: make me feel,□ she writes. She cannot encourage her students to open up and then turn around and suppress her own feelings. If she is brave enough to face the consequences, maybe her students will follow suit. So she demonstrates that she is practicing what she preaches.

In the final stanza, the speaker continues on her journey. She is gaining on her emotions; rather than just guessing about them and expecting others to guess too, she can now almost see them. She is not quite on top of them, not truly feeling the real emotion yet, but she is close enough to □imagine.□ Then she closes her poem with another beautiful and telling scene. She offers this stanza to her students, showing them through her writing what poetry is all about, at least for her. She demonstrates how to make others understand what she is trying to say. She gives them the picture of her standing barefoot, exposed to the elements. Instead of wearing a green dress to symbolize the pine tree (and her longing), she now walks out and stands under real pine trees. Rather than needling her students to write better, she walks barefoot on the needles and invites the needles to prick her skin. She wants to do more than think about her emotions, see her emotions, or even write about her emotions. She wants to feel them. With this image, she encourages her students to do the same.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on □Pine,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Martinelli is a Seattle-based freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Martinelli examines how Hahn uses homonyms in her poem to examine the pleasures and pains of love and relationships.

The poem □Pine□ appears in Hahn's collection *Mosquito and Ant* (1999). The work takes on a strange form, with the poem broken into eight parts, separated by roman numerals. Although the poetic form is of great interest, it is the use of homonyms that is the most intriguing with regard to the exploration of the poem's subject matter: love. In □Pine,□ Hahn looks at the ups and downs of relationships, love, and the inevitable risks that ensue when two individuals engage one another. The poem relies heavily upon trees to establish a metaphor about love and the personal struggle that accompanies the pursuit of love. In beautiful language, Hahn uses homonyms related to evergreen trees to deliver a powerful, emotive description of the pleasure, pain, and timelessness associated with love.

The poem is written in the first person, making the emotions all the more personal, touching, and heart-wrenching. In the opening stanza, Hahn talks of her attempts to divulge her feelings for another. She writes,

I thought wearing an evergreen dress

might be enough to express the longing

of the pine

though it or because it retains its scent

throughout the snowfall

and above the tree line. That's what I thought.

In the first line of the first stanza, Hahn begins to develop the tree metaphor with reference to her dress. The scent of the tree permeates all, even reaching far beyond the tree line, into the wasteland that exists at higher elevations, plagued with permafrost and little to no vegetation. The distant scent of the pine creates a longing for the tree, and Hahn hopes that her unrequited lover will feel for her what a hiker might feel for a pine tree far above the tree line as the lonely soul marches through a lifeless wasteland. Hahn hopes to deliver all of this feeling and emotion by wearing her evergreen dress. With this emotional outpouring Hahn begins developing her first homonym: *pine*.

A *pine* is defined as any of several types of evergreen trees that have needlelike leaves and bear cones. Their sap produces turpentine and tar. Essentially, this is a strict definition of the large, wonderfully scented trees that Hahn uses to draw comparisons to her dress. It is, of course, a tree with which many North Americans are familiar, whether they grow outside their homes or are cut down and used as Christmas trees. But for

Hahn, they represent something beyond big, beautiful, scented ornamentals. The scent and the longing for the scent is a metaphor for her unrequited longing for her lover□the man for whom she has donned her dress. Intrinsic to the first stanza is Hahn's emotional outpouring of her longing, her *pining*. As a verb, *pine* means □to suffer intense longing.□ The connection of these two homonyms paints a rich picture of unrequited love and the deep, personal yearning one feels for another. The pine scent metaphor supports this idea, because it is easy to imagine the longing a hiker must feel for trees, for example, when he smells the rich scent of the pine as he walks through the desolate, lonely permafrost above the tree line. This *pining for pine* mirrors Hahn's longing for her lover.

In the second stanza, Hahn shifts gears and turns away from longing to discuss her life as a professor. She writes, □I needle my students / and a few write inflamed poems / to my ideological bent and my ankle bracelet.□ Here, Hahn expresses herself as a tough, inciting professor who delivers her message with fervor, via her □ideological bent,□ and she says she understands that some of her students pine over her and write poems to her ankle bracelet. The most important line of this stanza, however, is the first, in which she introduces another tree-linked homonym: needle. The verb *needle* means □to goad or taunt.□ Hahn prods her students, stirring their emotions to extract a response in the form of poetry. She writes, □And the only way to guide them / through their own compost / is to needle them harder□,□ meaning that she must provoke her students to help them escape from the clutches of their *compost*, that is, their *bulls* . Hahn is describing the pain□the needling□that her students must endure in order to unearth the pleasures of poetry they so eagerly pine for in her classroom. This correlation between the students' enduring Hahn's needling to fulfill their pining for poetry is the setting for Hahn's own exploration of her longing for her lover.

As a noun, a *needle* is a rigid and narrow leaf. With this definition, Hahn is poised to return to the examination of her personal, emotional struggle for her lover. The end of the second stanza rushes into the feelings of her heart, as she states, □Still / X sends terrifying love letters / that send so much blood to the chest / the fingers are cold.□ Here, Hahn switches from her students back to herself and her relationship and focuses on this topic until the end of the poem. The third stanza is short, and with it Hahn begins addressing another person. She writes in the one-line third stanza, □You say it's from *a crush*□ and, into the fourth stanza, □You say quit using *he* and *hims* / when the specificity of *John* / is more engaging. / I needle: make me feel.□ These stanzas are an exchange between Hahn and a trusted other person, possibly a student, given the directive □You say.□ In any case, these stanzas are important because the role of needling in Hahn's relationship to her □*John*□ begins to surface. In the final line of the fourth stanza, Hahn seems to recognize that pain is feeling and that she must risk needling to reach what she pines for□her lover, her *John*.

The three stanzas that follow, two of which consist of only one line, address Hahn's lust, something yet unexplored in her examination of love. In the fifth stanza, Hahn professes to her lover, □Next time I make a C-note / from a poem / I will send you a red dress / I have tried on myself first.□ Two lustful images emerge from these lines: first, that Hahn intends to send her lover a dress that has touched her skin and, second, that the dress

will come from the sale of a poem. The idea of a dress that has touched the skin of another is a clear symbol of physical desire, but to tie the dress to her poetry is to link her physical desire to her deep, emotional pining for her lover's heart.

In the end, Hahn returns to the role of homonyms and her exploration of love through the tree metaphor. The final stanza reads,

I see pine and I see

what I know is feeling.

I imagine stepping barefoot

under those trees

onto a bed of their

brown needles.

So prick my skin.

There is a deep clarity and sadness in this stanza; Hahn sees the forest of love for the trees. In seeing an individual pine, she sees what she knows is feeling. Her emotions for her □*John*□ are clear□she pines for him. The pine trees represent something unparalleled and ancient, that is, the philosophical *being* of love, which has been explored, examined, and left unanswered for eternity. However, Hahn, in seeing the forest, still understands that her pine tree is her subjective interaction with the overarching concept of love and that these risky, subjective encounters are her only opportunities to explore and feel love.

This revelation is startling, because with it undeniably comes the pain□the needling□of uncertainty. Hahn pines for her lover. She spots him from afar and thinks of him when he may not be near (like the hiker and the scent of the tree). But in order to reach her lover, she must make herself vulnerable, □stepping barefoot / under those trees / onto a bed of their / brown needles.□ These lines present a clear understanding: to get close to that which you pine for, you must make yourself vulnerable to needling. Falling in love is risky business, because to be left without a reciprocated emotion is to be pricked deeply. With this infliction, the brown needles are no longer green and fragrant, giving off a scent for which Hahn pines. In fact, they take on the opposite role; the needles actually *needle*.

Hahn does not reveal whether she is successful with her lover. For Hahn, love is always and forever a double-edged sword, and her use of homonyms and the metaphor of the trees support how she defines love. The homonyms build the foundation, because the tree is a representation of her lover. The needles are green and everlasting, giving off a scent that travels far and wide, permeating everything. The pine is tall, ancient, and strong, living through snowfall, sunshine, seasons, and epochs. Then, on the flip side, the homonyms of these glorious representations of love are verbs that are weak or

uncomfortable. To pine is to long for something that is forever unrequited, and to needle is to tease; neither action is comfortable. Thus, in every beautiful pine full of fragrant needles resides the possibility of unrequited longing and emotional distress from goading.

This is Hahn's commentary about love. If a person does not approach someone he or she loves, that person will live forever pining over unrequited love. But if a person approaches the loved one, that person becomes vulnerable to painful needling and may live forever with rejection. Of course, without the risk, there is no hope for reward. Thus, in the last line of her poem, Hahn expresses what undoubtedly is her true feeling about love. She writes, So prick my skin and takes a step toward the pine, willing to risk the physical and emotional pain associated with rejection. With this final line, Hahn concludes that it is far better to risk needling than to live on forever pining.

Source: Anthony Martinelli, Critical Essay on Pine, in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Trudell is an independent scholar with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, he discusses the theme of sexual desire, particularly fervent, middle-aged female desire, in Pine and throughout Mosquito and Ant*.*

□Pine□ is a poem about frustration, longing, and desire and their consequences. The speaker aches for her lover, John, but he is unavailable to her, and his letters leave her fingers □cold□ and insensible□without feeling□despite the fact that they send □so much blood to the chest.□ Because she cannot have him, and because she has a desperate desire to feel something, she finds ways to procure secondary, or indirect, feelings instead. The speaker compares herself to a pine tree, for example, going so far as attempting to dress in the color of a pine in order to express the other meaning of the word: longing and languishing from that longing.

One of the most interesting aspects of the speaker's pining for John is the fact that her desire transforms, adjusts, and transfers to other people and other situations as she attempts to satisfy it. These attempts range from □prick[ing]□ pine needles on her skin to refocusing her desire on her students and her companion, to whom the poem is addressed. Many of these actions relate to other poems in *Mosquito and Ant*, a collection that continually revisits the complex theme of desire, particularly female sexual desire.

In order to analyze a poem or theme in *Mosquito and Ant*, it is first important to recognize that the collection functions as a whole and actually concentrates on a single main character. Such clues as the main character's repeated references to her lover, husband, daughters, and job as a poetry teacher are the most straightforward suggestions that one woman is the subject of all of the poems in the collection. Also, because the collection refers to an ancient Chinese tradition by which women communicated with each other, it soon becomes clear that each poem is actually addressed by one speaker, or narrator, to her friend □L.□

As this main character expresses her state of being to □L,□ she soon begins to let on that she is having a midlife crisis of sorts. For example, in the speaker's initial correspondence to □L,□ labeled as such in the subtitle to □Wax,□ she presents a forceful poem about her desire to □stay a woman,□ as though she is in danger of losing her womanhood. Hahn makes it perfectly clear that female identity is inextricably connected to sexual desire, and she even goes so far as to imply that inexhaustible sexual desire constitutes, or defines, womanhood. Here, as in a great many of the poems of *Mosquito and Ant*, the speaker's vitality, and her spark for life, are centered on her sexual encounters and fantasies, whether they be with her husband, her lover, or □L.□ Sex seems to be her most important inspiration, and the speaker's most passionate, energetic, and meaningful moments tend to be connected with sexual desire.

The speaker's constant allusions to her sexual fantasies and desires in her correspondence to □L□ suggest that sexuality, namely, sexual dissatisfaction, is the key to her midlife crisis. When in □Morning Light□ the central female character feels □buried: that there is no feeling left in her body only the idea of feelings,□ this seems to be mainly from the lack of sexual passion in her marriage and her dejected feelings of worth as a sexual being. The poem spends much of its time either musing back to the time when the woman's husband was thrilling and she was sexually alluring or lamenting the fact that life is no longer this way. The most significant moment of the poem comes when the woman remembers climbing onto her husband's lap to arouse him, when, instead, he □kissed her lightly and urged her off.□ This rejection fuels the insecurity and dissatisfaction that grow and fester in the woman's memories and in her present morning routine.

In the poems that follow, whether they focus on the speaker's intriguing relationship with □L,□ the nature of language and correspondence, or her day-to-day existence with her husband and daughters, Hahn insistently harkens back to sexuality as the one thing that consistently brings feeling back into the speaker's body. Other important aspects of the speaker's life cannot be divided or separated from sexual desire. This is an important reason why, in poems such as □Croissant,□ the speaker is able to shift swiftly but seamlessly from her thoughts about her lover □X,□ to her description of sex to her eldest daughter, to the observation that she and her daughters □fall in love□ with a female photographer.

Indeed, sex is not taboo or foreign to the speaker's relationship with her daughters; it is extremely important to the mother-daughter bond, as evidenced in the poem □Tissue.□ Discussing her longing for her mother, the speaker describes how a baby puts its fist in its mouth: □The fist feels good, tastes vaguely *like mother*. / The nipple. The Other.□ She then extends this idea to apply to her own daughter, noting that she listens to her heartbeat the way the mother listens to the baby inside her body. Because □The Other□ can refer to the sexual other, or the object of sexual desire, and because the mother-daughter relationship is characterized as a passageway back into the womb, Hahn is suggesting that sex and sexual reproduction permeate all manners of existence. There is no strict dividing line between different forms of love and desire, particularly in the speaker's earnest and occasionally even desperate middle-aged search for meaning.

The concept of transference, in which sexual desire permeates many other aspects of the speaker's life, is particularly important in □Pine.□ When the speaker □needle[s]□ her students and offers to send □L□ a dress that she has tried on herself, it is as though she believes that she will be able to feel vicariously through others□as though she will satisfy her own desires based on what □L□ and the students feel. In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of this poem is that it never allows the speaker to actually feel anything, however much she desires this. She is continually feeling and experiencing through a medium, beginning with the evergreen dress worn to attempt (unsuccessfully) to express the longing of the pine tree, which communicates the speaker's longing for John. The □inflamed□ poems of her students are merely

surrogates for the speaker's own flame for John, and the speaker cannot experience �real� light (which is the neighbor's, not hers), since it is blocked by a curtain.

This building tension and refusal to release it continue into the next lines about guiding the students �through their own compost� and �needl[ing] them harder.� These lines are somewhat confusing, since �them� grammatically seems to refer to the �flurries� but must actually refer to the students, because the speaker is discussing how to encourage them to work through their discarded poetry. Then the speaker switches subjects again, to say that �X� sends her �terrifying love letters� that make her lose feeling in her fingers. Not only does this stanza describe desires and longings that are distanced from feelings, it also confuses and melds the speaker's sexual desire for John with many other desires. In fact, Hahn is implying that John is not the solitary object of the speaker's desire but instead a target for a much more diverse sexual appetite: a sort of general target, as his name �X� suggests.

�The Tumbler,� which comes immediately before �Pine� in *Mosquito and Ant*, is an example of a poem that demonstrates this idea particularly clearly, since it is focused on the speaker's homoerotic desire for �L.� In the first stanza of �The Tumbler,� the speaker says she calls �L� �to hear you / tell me you love me,� and by the end of the poem there is little doubt that this is very much an erotic and sexual love. In the fifth stanza, as usual, Hahn makes an abrupt segue from her fantasies about �X� to address �L,� which, as usual, mixes and melds the reader's ideas about who is actually her object of desire. This time, however, the speaker is directly sexual in her comments to �L,� telling her, �You think morning glories open / because you open / in that light,� which implies that �L� is opening sexually for the speaker. The final stanza emphasizes this point even more overtly, because the speaker describes herself as �ripped open / to the moon's movements� and the moon is a classic archetype of femininity and love.

A variety of additional poems are steeped in homoerotic female sexuality, including the collection's final four poems, which focus on mothers and daughters. �Responding to Light,� for example, stems from the speaker's insatiable sexual appetite as she imagines the sexual development of her daughters. The lines �squeezes her nipple or flicks her vulva� / if she tastes her taste / she is tasting her mother and daughter� demonstrate that the speaker's relationship with her daughters does not just maintain a level of comfort with sexual content but actually revels in sexuality. The mother-daughter relationship is one of the most personal, and uniquely feminine, motifs in the collection; the speaker draws attention to it by placing it as a particularly important aspect of her multifaceted sexual desire.

It is �L,� however, who is the most frequent female object of desire for the speaker; this should come as no surprise, given that Hahn's collection of erotic poems about love and desire are all directed at one principal audience: �L.� The speaker refers frequently to John and her husband, but she has a tendency to drift, in her many abrupt changes of subject, to �L� and to their communal female sexual desire. By the fourth stanza of �Pine,� for example, the speaker is mixing up pronouns as she demands either John or �L� to �make me feel,� and then she moves to a specific and erotic

description of giving L a dress that she has tried on herself. Then, in the seventh stanza, the line You say it's the *he* in *heat* implies that John or X is only a part of the concept of sexual heat, which takes its biological meaning of a female animal ready to copulate.

The speaker's sexual desire is therefore particularly telling when it is focused, as it very often is, on other females; it demonstrates the importance of female communal desire and female sexuality in Hahn's collection. In fact, female sexuality, which extends to nearly every aspect of the speaker's life, is the key to unlocking the meaning of Hahn's collection. Sexual desire is not merely a by-product of menopause or middle-aged feelings of insecurity or inadequacy but a defining aspect of the meaning that the speaker and Hahn find in life. Constantly moving from one object of erotic desire to the next, female sexuality provides the collection with its purpose, direction, and vitality.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on Pine, in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

The Heian period in Japanese history is rich with literary accomplishments. Research this topic, and choose two female authors who you think might be included in Hahn's reference to the Immortal Sisters□female poets of that period to whom Hahn often addresses her own poetry. In comparing the writing of the Heian writers to Hahn's, look for similar subjects, style, tone, and themes. How is Hahn's poetry like that of the women of the Heian period? How do her poems differ?

Compose a series of tanka poems. In the first set, describe a beautiful scene you have experienced in nature. In the second, focus on your relationship with someone close to you. For the third set, write as if you were corresponding with other women (or men), discussing particular details of what it is like to be a woman (or man) living in the United States. Be as strict as you can with the tanka format, counting the syllables and putting as much emotion as you can into the short form.

Men wrote poetry in the Heian period also, and poems in the tanka style are still written by men. Research this topic. How do these poems differ from women's, if they do at all? Are the subjects the same? Are the emotions expressed differently?

Japanese literature is known for its use of symbols, such as the pine tree. However, writers of American poetry and prose also use symbols. One such symbol is the oak tree, which is used to express strength. Research this topic. List typical American symbols and what they represent. Then reread one of your favorite poems or works of fiction to see if any of these symbols are used.

Write a poem (in any format), a short story, or a short essay in which you focus on the five senses: sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing. The purpose of this exercise is to describe a scene, a person, an encounter, or an experience using all five senses to bring that experience alive for your readers. Reread Hahn's poem □Pine□ to remind yourself how she used the five senses and to give yourself hints on how you might do the same. Use metaphors to enhance your writing.

BOOKRAGS

What Do I Read Next?

Joseph Bruchac's *Breaking Silence: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Poets* (1983) provides an introduction to poetry written by a wide range of Asian American authors. Included in this collection are several poems by Hahn, such as “When You Leave,” “Dance Instructions for a Young Girl,” and “A Girl Combs Her Hair.” Other writers represented in this book are some of the most well-known Asian American poets in contemporary literature: Garrett Kaoru Hongo, Joy Kogawa, Diana Chang, Marilyn Chin, Gail N. Harada, Alex Kuo, Deborah Lee, Jim Mitsui, David Mura, and Traise Yamamoto.

Akiko Baba is one of modern Japan's most famous writers of tanka. In *Heavenly Maiden Tanka* (1999), one hundred of Baba's tanka poems have been translated. For a better understanding of where Hahn is coming from, read and enjoy Baba's poetry.

The poetry of Cathy Song, a well-known Asian American poet, was collected in *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light: Poems* (1988; reissued in 2003). In this book, Song again captures small moments in life and expands their beauty, a hallmark of her poetry. Many of these poems reflect Song's joy of motherhood as she explores her emotions watching her children grow up. The lessons she learns are not restricted only to those who have given birth and raised children, however. Song's writing goes beyond these narrow definitions and offers every reader insights into life no matter what the circumstances.

For an examination of the times before Asian American literature enjoyed the popularity and recognition it benefits from today, readers might be interested in Helen Zia's *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (2001). Zia was raised in New Jersey in the 1950s, before the great literary movement that pushed Asian American literature into the forefront of study on most American college campuses. Zia reflects on the challenges that she faced, unaware of her own cultural differences as well as any camaraderie she might have experienced in knowing other Asian Americans who shared her interests and background. As she becomes more involved in her own awakening, she builds a community around her of other people who are living on the fringes of society.

There is a new generation of Asian American poets, and Victoria M. Chang and Marilyn Chin have collected these young poets' works in *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation* (2004). Readers will find in this anthology a sampling of works of such new poets as Lisa Asagi, Rick Barot, Jennifer Chang, Linh Dinh, Suji Kwock Kim, Srikanth Reddy, and Adrienne Su.

Li-Young Lee is one of the first Asian American poets to receive critical attention and helped clear the path for the current generation. In his *Book of My Nights: Poems* (2001), Lee looks back at his childhood and explores his relationship with his father, a man who was a personal doctor for Mao Zedong.

Another path maker in the quest to bring Asian American poetry to the forefront of university study is Garrett Hongo, born in Hawaii and professor at the University of Oregon. Hongo's writing is often compared to that of Walt Whitman. Readers can come up with their own comparisons while reading Hongo's *The River of Heaven: Poems* (1988), a collection of poems about what it is like to live in a society that pushes nonwhite citizens to the margins.

In *The Unbearable Heart* (1995), Hahn focuses on the effects of her mother's death not only on herself but also on her children.

In 2002, *The Artist's Daughter: Poems* was published. Here Hahn explores her various roles in life as mother, lover, wife, and poet as well as her mixed heritage.

Further Study

Baird, Merrily C., *Symbols of Japan: Thematic Motifs in Art and Design*, Rizzoli, 2001.

Japanese literature and art are full of symbols, and one of the most common symbols is that of the pine tree. To better understand a piece of Japanese art or a work of literature, it is helpful to be aware of the symbolic language. This great reference book offers its readers an insider's point of view.

Hirshfield, Jane, *The Ink Dark Moon: Love Poems by Ono no Komachi and Izumi Shikibu, Women of the Ancient Court of Japan*, Vintage, 1999.

Komachi and Shikibu were women poets of the Heian period. They, along with other poets from that time, have greatly influenced Hahn's writing. This book offers the reader a taste of the sensual love poems from that era.

Huang, Guiyou, ed., *Asian American Poets: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, Greenwood Press, 2002.

Huang has collected brief biographies on a wide selection of Asian American poets. Also included in this book is a wealth of information not only on the works of these writers but also on their critical reception. Forty-eight poets are included, with a focus on such writers as Cathy Song, Meena Alexander, and Virginia R. Cerenio.

Keene, Donald, *Anthology of Japanese Literature: From the Earliest Era to the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Grove Press, 1955.

Donald Keene is one of the United States' most renowned translators of Japanese literature. In this anthology, Keene guides the reader on a great journey through some of the best Japanese work ever written. Included is a large section of literature from the Heian period.

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BOOKRAGS

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Project Editor
David Galens

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

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

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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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:

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