Rapture Study Guide

Rapture by Joelle Biele

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

Rapture Study Guide....................1
Contents....................2
Introduction....................3
Author Biography....................4
Plot Summary....................5
Themes....................10
Style....................12
Historical Context....................13
Critical Overview....................14
Criticism....................15
Critical Essay #1....................16
Critical Essay #2....................19
Topics for Further Study....................22
What Do I Read Next?....................23
Further Study....................24
Bibliography....................25
Copyright Information....................26

Introduction

Joelle Biele's poem "Rapture" appears in her first collection, *White Summer*, published in 2002. The poem first appeared in print in the *Iowa Review* in 2001. This poem is representative of Biele's creative ability to turn the commonplace into something marvelous, to select the precise words that describe an emotion or a moment or all of nature in ways that the reader may not have previously considered.

"Rapture" is made up of thirty lines, each attempting to express or personify an example of the poem's title. While many people may reserve this word to describe something incredibly rare or even sacred, Biele here shows that sheer bliss can be found in virtually every minute of daily life, every sound, every taste, every *thing* within both the natural and not-so-natural worlds. Biele seeks to reveal the potential for ecstasy in things that are often overlooked or disregarded. Rapture, she suggests, is everywhere□but human beings must learn to recognize it.

While Biele's name is still relatively new and perhaps not widely known among contemporary American poetry readers, a poem such as "Rapture" provides a good introduction to the full body of her early work. Its energy, insight, and exquisite details demonstrate Biele's simple love for language□and a raw talent for using it.

Author Biography

Poet Joelle Biele was born in 1969, in the Bronx, New York. In 1991, she received a bachelor's degree in English from Tufts University in Boston, and she earned her master of fine arts and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Maryland, College Park, in 1993 and 1998, respectively. Even as a young poet, Biele was recognized as a strong talent in making language come alive in her work. The rich imagery and precise descriptions that comprise her poems earned her early recognition throughout contemporary literary circles. She was the winner of both the Ruth Lake Award and the Cecil Hemley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America. She received a 1998—1999 Fulbright fellowship to Germany, where she taught American literature, and she has served as a lecturer in the English department at the University of Maryland.

Biele's first full-length collection of poems, *White Summer*, won a First Book Award from the Crab Orchard Review Series in Poetry and was published in 2002. Her poem "Rapture" is included in this collection, but first appeared in the Winter 2001 edition of the *Iowa Review*.

Plot Summary

Line 1

The word "it" appears twenty-seven times in the thirty lines of "Rapture," beginning with the first word. While this abundant use of a single word may not be remarkable, the manner in which it serves as the *gel* of the work is certainly worth considering. Throughout the poem "it" refers to one thing: rapture. The suggestion is that extreme joy originates in a variety of forms, especially in sounds. In the first line, it begins as a "low rumbling, white static," perhaps a likeness to white *noise*the combination of all sound frequencies that creates a din. Line 1 serves not only as a first example of where rapture may begin, but it also introduces the importance of paying attention to sound, which the poem emphasizes throughout.

Line 2

This line alludes to the common belief that one can hear the ocean roaring in a seashell and also implies that the "low rumbling" in line 1 may indeed be the roar of the ocean. To maintain the image, Biele bluntly states that rapture also "starts with water," and the poem returns to water imagery several more times.

Line 3

The first two words of line 3 continue the ocean allusion begun in the previous line, but then the imagery takes an abrupt turnfrom the ebb and flow of a sea tide to "the cold kiss of the sun." By juxtaposing these opposing images, Biele suggests the infinite possibilities of where rapture may be found. Playing opposites against each other to imply limitless options is also found in the contradictory description of the sun's "kiss" as "cold."

Lines 4—5

These two lines take rapture to yet another level but still allude to different sounds. Hands clapping, birds clamoring, and laughter so loud it is "coming through the walls" all infer a cacophony of sounds that are, if not pleasant, at least fun and generally upbeat. And any one of these soundsno matter how loud or cacophonousmight contain the ingredients for creating rapture.

Lines 6—7

In these lines, rapture is likened to three distinct circumstances, though all have to do with things one can hear. The idea of "snow breathing" suggests a quiet, tranquil sound,

barely audible, like soft human breathing. But this peaceful scenario is quickly contrasted with the loud, sharp clatter of "bottles falling." The "night hum of the road" is somewhere between quiet and loud sounds, as one can certainly hear cars and trucks traveling down the highway, but the "hum" of the passing vehicles is not generally considered annoying or clamorous.

Line 8

Until line 8, the sounds and images that represent rapture are highly illustrious and inventive. Now the switch is to the mundane, largely overlooked noise of "a bus shifting gears." The speaker's point, however, is well made with this unembellished, commonplace description: whether the sun is offering a cold kiss or a city bus is starting its route, rapture can be found in both.

Lines 9—11

Line 9 and the first part of line 10 return to a more creative, metaphoric language for the images they describe, incorporating nature in its simplest form as a symbol of rapture. The "flower inside the tree" and the "song / inside the wood" imply a serene harmony among these natural elements. The imagery in the latter part of line 10 again seems to take an abrupt turn, but perhaps there is a subtle connection among the tree, the "mouthpiece buzzing," and a "Bach cantata." Note that the wood of the tree has a *song* within it. This musical metaphor leads to the feel of a musical instrument's mouthpiece humming against a musician's lips. And this, in turn, leads to the "*psh-psh*" tone of a full-fledged religious choral by Bach. Whether the source of sheer joy is the very audible cantata or the imaginary song of a tree, rapture resides in either.

Lines 12—13

Line 12 claims that rapture may stem from the common autumn activity of "walking through a pile of leaves," and line 13 suggests that the season has changed□"wet legs and poppies" imply a walk through a colorful, damp field after a spring or summer shower□but the "it" remains the same. Rapture can be found during any season of the year.

Lines 14—15

Chicory is a perennial herb and leafy plant that is edible but often considered "bitter" in its raw form. Perhaps its purpose here is simply to play off the *seasonal* dried leaves and poppies mentioned in the previous lines. The "diked fields" and "the suck under your shoe" are surely connected to taking a walk, as well as to rain or dew or other watery imagery. Dikes are ditches or embankments created to help control water flow, and the "suck" is the squishing sound made by shoes when one walks across damp

grounds. Considering such a noise *rapturous* is not likely for many people, but Biele infers that human beings need to find more pleasure in simple, uneventful things.

Line 15 includes the first address in second-person□it is the suck under *your* shoe. Until now, Biele has used only the generic third-person, as in line 2: a broken shell to *the* ear. The more personal "your" becomes more prevalent at the end of the poem, though it is not necessarily an address to any particular individual. It is more likely a universal *you* or even the poet speaking to herself in second-person.

Line 16

Compare the first image in line 16 to that in line 8. The sound of "an idling motor" is as ordinary as a "bus shifting gears," and both are of little significance in the average person's daily life. When a car motor *stops* working, however, an angry driver will pay very keen attention to it. The poet's approach is to find joy in a good engine instead of frustration in a bad one. The second image in line 16 appears to have nothing to do with the first unless the reader considers that both motors and horses have something to do with transportation. Aside from this dubious connection, "horses in fog" simply presents an intriguing visual image and is worthy of being called blissful.

Line 17

Like line 14, line 17 employs food imagery to describe rapture, though here it is sweet and oily instead of bitter. The "spilt sugar" is an obvious reference to sweetness, and "sizzle and spatter" are reminiscent of hot oil in a pan reacting to the heat beneath it.

Lines 18—19

These lines rely heavily again on water imagery. Line 18 also includes the second reference to "your": "your voice under water." The three distinct images in these lines are connected by their relationship to motion. When someone dives under water and attempts to speak, the result is mostly bubbles and ripples. The image then shifts to the "bell buoy's sway," which leads to swaying on a grander scale, "a sail luffing, whispering" ("luffing" means flapping).

Lines 20—21

In these two lines, rapture originates in a variety of disparate beings and things. Two of them□the policeman and the dog□are *doing* something: walking and barking. The other three are simply identified: "a rosy ear, . . . honey and flies." With these images, the poet nearly dares the reader to find a connection, but perhaps the point is not to look too hard. The central idea of the poem, after all, is that rapture can come from anybody and anything at any time.

Lines 22—23

If the reader is a bit befuddled by the hodgepodge items in the previous two lines, these two lines may seem even more odd in their unmistakable *violent* details. Until now, Biele's images have been pleasant, funny, upbeat, happy, peaceful, or simply mundane. But here rapture "starts with a knife sharpening / and plates smashing against the door." In keeping with the original notion that extreme joy is found in a variety of noises, a knife sharpening and plates breaking certainly fit the bill. But these are not generally considered *good* sounds. They do, however, suggest a sudden urgency, a compelling attempt to include *everything* in a virtual list of places where rapture may start. If this poem has a climax, these two lines are likely it. The work draws to a quick close after line 23 but not before describing the urgency in more detail and then letting the falling action bring it to an end.

Lines 24—25

Lines 24 and 25 portray the human element with more fervor than earlier parts of the poem. Previously, human needs seem fulfilled with simple pleasures□holding a shell to the ear, clapping hands, listening to music, walking through leaves. Now happiness comes from "deep in the belly, the back of the throat," as though the fulfillment level has grown more guttural, more imperative. The "need" is now "like salt, crackle and flame," a far cry from flowers, trees, wet legs, and poppies. Like the images themselves, the tone of "Rapture" has greatly sharpened toward the end.

Lines 26—28

These three lines help to *resolve* the poem, bringing it full circle in its myriad list of joys. All the sounds mentioned throughout the work contain the origin of rapture, many of them stemming from the actions of human beings. Here the human appears to have no control over pinpointing rapture□it just happens beyond his or her grasp. The use of second-person makes the address more immediate and personal, which is ironic considering the descriptions are much less concrete and vivid. The "sounds you've never made" may contain rapture, but what are they? If it is not "your voice in your mouth," whose is it? And if "Your words are not your own," whose are they? These questions are merely rhetorical and have no specific answers. The resolution, however, is that rapture originates in both the known and the unknown. "Your" job is to accept that.

Lines 29—30

The two highly metaphoric lines that end the poem rely solely on creative imagery to describe rapture instead of the more visible, objective depictions that permeate the rest of the work. The joyful feeling of the "body breaking into islands" implies a letting-go of the *whole* in order to experience the bliss derived from the *parts*. Note also that this

metaphor employs yet another water image. Finally, the imagery shifts again from the sea to the air, as in lines 2 and 3. Leaves falling and lifting through wind also imply a letting-go, emphasizing the origin of rapture in both the abstract and the concrete.

Themes

Joy in the Commonplace

The straightforward title of Biele's poem makes its central theme appear obvious: here is a work about what rapture is, at least in the poet's opinion. But perhaps it is not as simple as that. In parts of the world where fundamental Christianity is predominant—and in the United States particularly—*rapture* takes on a significantly religious meaning, referring to the period of time when Christians, both dead and alive, will ascend to heaven prior to the final war between good and evil, marking the end of time as humans know it. As dramatic as this scenario may seem, none of it is mentioned in Biele's poem "Rapture." Instead, this work concentrates on the less lofty ideals of what bliss really is, centering on the commonplace, minute, and often disregarded things and events that make up daily life. Most of these "rapturous" things do not even leave a distinct impression in people's minds.

Something as ordinary as clapping hands or laughing is rarely seen as a source of great joy. While both acts suggest a happy moment or occasion, neither is generally described in terms of ecstasy and euphoria. The same may be said for listening to a favorite piece of music or walking through a pile of leaves on a crisp autumn day. Again, the events are pleasant enough but *rapturous* seems a bit exaggerated. And if these cheerful, comforting times in one's life go largely overlooked for their bliss value, consider how much less attention is paid to "a bus shifting gears" and "an idling motor." Yet these innocuous, if not boring, everyday events also make Biele's rapture list.

To say the poem radiates a positive attitude is an obvious understatement, but perhaps the reason is not so conspicuous. If one's definition of rapture—aside from the end-of-time religious reference—is so narrow that it allows for only the rarest, most spectacular, glorious moments and events, then how often does a person actually get to experience it? For some people, perhaps a few times; for others, never. The point then is to find rapture in the places and times that one can experience every day. The old adage about taking time to stop and smell the roses is a simple way to explain this theme in "Rapture." But Biele would argue that there is a lot more to stop for than sweetly scented flowers—seashells, dogs, honey, and buses, to name a few.

Joy in Nature

A theme closely related to finding joy in the commonplace is finding it in nature, whether it is in everyday natural occurrences or more infrequent phenomena. Water imagery is important in the poem, appearing as an ocean and seashells, wet legs and diked fields, a buoy and a sailboat, and a human body "breaking into islands." A human's relationship with water is as common as enjoying the dew beneath one's feet and as sublime as feeling one's self actually become a part of the ocean.

Other areas of nature in which rapture may be found include sunshine and snow; flowers and trees; poppies and chicory; and birds, horses, dogs, and flies. The list is intentionally disparate to emphasize the notion of looking *everywhere* for joy. A variety of tastes are also included—the sweetness of sugar, the "sizzle and spatter" of oil, the longing for salt. In these items, rapture is likened to the basest human need: food. Food is thrown into the mix of natural phenomena as easily as "the flower inside the tree, the song / inside the wood."

Finding various aspects of nature in a poem about joyful things should not be surprising, but "Rapture" offers an intriguing twist. Although a person may thematically separate finding bliss in commonplace items and finding it in nature, they are one and the same according to the poem. Biele moves flawlessly from water to clapping hands to snow to a bus to a tree and so forth. The point, again, is simple: look for joy in everyday things, and you are likely to find it.

Style

Free verse is the term applied to rhymed or unrhymed poetry that is *free* of the conventional or traditional restrictions on metrical structure that nearly always apply in formal poetry. Adding the word contemporary to the description simply means that the poetic language reflects the actual language of the poet's place and time, as well as the subject matter of the same. Instead of composing a poem that is limited to a specific meter or meters, free verse poets place more emphasis on cadence—or rhythm and flow of the language—especially in the form of common speech. Free verse poems tend to carry more relaxed tones and sound more like conversation than highly structured works. Biele takes even greater liberty in "Rapture" in that she not only foregoes metrical structure but also places little or no emphasis on cadence.

The two elements that immediately stand out when looking at this poem on the page are Biele's use of couplets and her use of the word "It." While couplets are usually two lines of poetry sharing a common meter or rhythm and expressing a complete, self-contained thought, neither is true of this poem. Since there is no rhyme scheme or particular meter used, the unifying factor in "Rapture" is the repetition of the word "It."

What "It" refers to, of course, is rapture, but that word is never mentioned except in the title. When a single word appears twenty-seven times in a thirty-line poem, it must hold special significance and yet the little pronoun "it" seems hardly worthy of such importance. Most likely, the opposite is intended. This small word does not get in the way, and, therefore, it is perfect to act as the bond holding together a string of crisp, detailed images, which are the actual highlights of the work.

Consider what the poem would look and read like if the word "It" were replaced in several instances with words like rapture or joy or bliss. The immediate recognition of a repeated word would be gone, but something more important would happen, too. The message would likely seem contrived and overworked. The poet's voice would appear decidedly lofty, if not didactic. Putting the humble pronoun to work instead allows the reader to be taken in by the rich imagery and intriguing items on the list, instead of wading through a dull recital of *Rapture is . . .* and *Joy is . . .* and so on.

Historical Context

The political and social events that made news in the early part of the twenty-first century left little about which to feel rapturous. Perhaps, however, these events lend an even greater urgency to the message in Biele's poem. A person needs diligently to seek out joy in the microcosm of everyday life because the world at large is a difficult place in which to find it.

In America and across the globe, the dominant stories of 2002 were the ongoing war against terror in Afghanistan and elsewhere following the devastating events of September 11, 2001, and the build-up of tensions between the United States and Iraq over the possibility of Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction. Heavy bombing raids eventually crumbled the Taliban in Afghanistan and flushed out al Qaeda terrorists hiding in the region, but their leader Osama Bin Laden was nowhere to be found. In Iraq, U.N. weapons inspectors, the United States, and Hussein were enmeshed in a seesaw battle over when and where inspections would take place, how they would be conducted, who would be interviewed, and what restrictions, if any, should be allowed. By the end of the year, no resolution had been found, and the two nations moved closer to war.

In January 2002, the year in America started with the scare of a copycat September-11 attack when a light airplane crashed into a high-rise building in Tampa, Florida. The pilot, fifteen-year-old Charles Bishop, was later determined not to be a terrorist and no one was killed other than him. Also in January, a disgruntled student at the Appalachian School of Law in Grundy, Virginia, shot six people, killing three. In March, Andrea Yates was found guilty of drowning her five children the previous year; she was later sentenced to life in prison.

Other sensational stories that dominated the news included the May 2002 discovery of intern Chandra Levy's remains in Rock Creek Park in Washington, DC. Levy had disappeared in 2001. And in June 2002, Elizabeth Smart was kidnapped from her home in Utah, and was found alive nine months later, after being held by a fanatically religious man and woman who claimed she was part of their "family." Perhaps the most shocking event of 2002, however, came in October when for three weeks two elusive snipers roamed the roadways around Washington, DC, randomly gunning down men, women, and at least one child. Ten of their thirteen victims died. The pair were caught sleeping in their car at a rest stop on October 24.

Although the main news stories of the early twenty-first century were filled with violence, sadness, and shock, much of the media hype that surrounded them is simply a reflection of the human desire for sensationalism. Biele's poem reflects the other side of the coin. The simple joys of "listening" to a seashell, walking through leaves, or even noticing the sound of a bus shifting gears will never make the evening news, but they do make for a comforting *reprieve* from the evening news. A person needs only to choose a year and read its timeline of events to understand why.

Critical Overview

Because Biele's first collection is such a recent publication, sparse criticism is available. However, *White Summer* won a First Book Award from the Crab Orchard Review Series in Poetry, and poet and critic Allison Joseph, commenting why she selected *White Summer* for the award, notes, "Biele's poems, which range from short lyrics to longer meditations, are startling in their clarity, precise in their diction, and deft in their craft. . . . This book is alive in the world, not just merely of it." In a review of *White Summer* for the *Antioch Review*, poet and critic Jane Satterfield writes, "Biele's poems are perfectly pitched; oracular but not vatic, inviting and often arresting in their cinematic intensity and musicality." On the poem "Rapture" specifically, Satterfield comments, "Rapture, for this poet, then, is engagement, not escape."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill examines the religious aspects of "Rapture" and suggests that its message about divinity relies on images of movement in a secular world.

A poem titled "Rapture" apparently begs to be read as commentary on religious experience or religious belief, but readers need to be aware of various readers' perspectives before making such an assumption. The concept of a divine rapture□when only believing-Christians will be literally taken up into the heavens by Jesus Christ and saved from Armageddon□is obviously not a theory shared by all people around the world who consider themselves religious. Many people have never heard of it. Ideas of rapture, tribulation, and a final war between good and evil are most closely associated with the fundamental, evangelical branches of Christianity found in the United States, particularly in the rural South. Given this, the audience for Biele's poem narrows considerably, if, in fact, this poem is about that kind of rapture.

Perhaps the ambiguity is intentional. People who believe in a spiritual rapture□or at least those who are aware of the concept□can read the poem within the context of their own beliefs. Readers who understand the word "rapture" to mean only great joy may view it as an exploration of where happiness originates. Here, the intent is to look at it as *both*, suggesting the poem's secular images combine in an urgent movement toward religious bliss.

Most of the images in "Rapture" infer movement in one form or another, jittery, tense, pleasant, and agitating all at once. Movement is portrayed not only in the physical action of someone or something, but also in the *motion of sound*. The first declaration of where rapture begins is with noise: "a low rumbling." If the rumbling is the roar of an ocean, oceans move, and so do the sounds they make. If the rumbling is distant thunder, thunder *rolls* across the sky, starting low, becoming louder, then dissipating. The "night hum of a road" implies motion too, for the source of the hum is the movement of vehicles up and down the highway. The same may be said for "the suck under your shoe," which happens when one walks across a watery field, and for the "sizzle and spatter" of oil in a hot skillet, which not only makes the sounds described but also pops and jumps about in the pan. Noises, then, are on the move too.

Other images of movement in the poem are more obvious□hands clapping, birds clamoring, bottles falling, someone walking through leaves, a dog barking, plates smashing, and so on. These are actions that one can see happening, but they are also actions that can be *heard* just as readily. The point of interest is that most of the motions describing what rapture is or where it begins possess an undercurrent of tension or unease about them. The birds are not sitting on a tree branch or gliding through the air, but are *clamoring* in swift, frenzied movement. The laughter is not the simple sound of someone chuckling at a funny incident but is so hysterical that it seems to be "coming

through the walls." The knife is not just lying on a counter or already in use cutting something; rather, it is "sharpening," suggesting a *preparation* for what is to come.

Nervous anticipation also provides the framework for the final four stanzas of the poem. Here rapture "starts deep in the belly, the back of the throat" where it is not yet completely recognizable, but readers have the impression it will be soon. The "sounds you've never made" and the voice that is "not your voice in your mouth" imply a strange, transcendental experience that is both pleasant and frightening at once. And, finally, the ultimate human movement occurs in the last stanza with the body "breaking into islands," insinuating a complete loss of control of one's *common* self. So if the idea of motion is established as a dominant force in "Rapture," what does this have to do with religion?

Many fundamental Christian religious practices involve highly animated physical activity during services. Members of a congregation who are spiritually "moved" may jump up and down, clap their hands, wave their arms, shout, cry, or suddenly begin talking in a language that is not their own, called "speaking in tongues." But these actions do not generally occur as soon as the pews are filled. Rather, there is a gradual build-up, typically guided by a pastor who may begin a sermon slowly and softly, then speak louder and with more intensity, and then return to a whisper before shouting again until the congregation is stimulated to respond, physically as well as emotionally. In other words, he or she may start the service with "a low rumbling" and culminate it when listeners are so caught up in the fervor of the moment that their bodies seem to "[break] into islands," abruptly freed of physical□and worldly□restraints.

What if one reads Biele's poem the way an evangelist may present a sermon? Keeping in mind that too much embellishment renders an analysis futile, consider the *presentation* of the message in "Rapture." The initial images are soft, gentle, unassuming. The rumbling is low but it is only beginning. A "tide pulling" signifies movement, still gentle, but anticipatory. Suddenly the placid scene is shattered by loud noises: clapping, clamoring, hysterical laughter. And just as suddenly, the whisper of "snow breathing." Opposing images are juxtaposed throughout the poem, from snow breathing to bottles falling, from horses standing in fog to the sizzle of hot oil in a pan, from honey and flies to a knife sharpening and plates smashing. All these disparate descriptions lend a frenetic quality to the poem, keeping it in a constant flux of up and down, loud and quiet, agitated and calm. And all seem to be *leading* somewhere.

Movement is not always linear. Some things go in circles or with a series of stops and starts. The poem suggests the move toward rapture is a mixture of it all, but *progression* is the bottom line. Three references to normal, earthly transportation are mentioned in "Rapture"□a bus shifting gears, a motor idling, and a sailboat with "luffing" sails. Each one represents a different step along the way but all infer a type of motion. The bus may be either downshifting to come to a stop or shifting into a higher gear to get going somewhere. In keeping with the poem's message, the latter is most likely. An idling motor is a sure sign of anticipated movement, and the boat's luffing sail is already in motion□flapping erratically, but on the move nonetheless.

The only actual reference to religion in the poem is a subtle one at that. Bach cantatas are religious chorals, but Biele seems more interested in the *sound* of the music—the "*psh-psh*" it makes—than in the fact that it was written as a church piece. Still, this and the other musical allusions maintain the overall concept of sound and movement. The "wood" has a "song" inside it and the "mouthpiece" is "buzzing." Both suggest a cheeriness already present, but they also imply something even better to come.

What is yet to come is revealed toward the end of the poem, and there is a remarkable contrast between the style of the first twenty-three lines and that of the final seven. Most of "Rapture" is comprised of concrete, easily recognizable images of everyday objects and events. Each one is very audible and/or visible, and some are things one can taste or smell. But such sensory images give way to more metaphoric, transcendental, perhaps *spiritual* notions in the last few stanzas. Here, the ideas are more abstract and mysterious. Instead of telling the reader what a thing *is*, the poet tells us what it is *not*. "It," meaning rapture, "starts with sounds you've never made." It is "not your voice in your mouth," and the words you speak "are not your own." Whose voice is it? Whose words are they?

The suggestion is not that the voice is God's or the words are those of someone speaking in tongues—such a leap would reek of the forewarned embellishment. But it is reasonable to conclude that what all the motion and agitation and noises have been leading up to cannot be expressed in explicit, concrete terms. It is too grand, too monumental. In short, it is rapture. The only way the physical body can respond is to break down the very fabric of its being and let the spirit take over. The only way the human mind can relate is through metaphor. Whether the final description of rapture—a "fall through wind lifting white leaves"—implies an evangelical religious experience or not, at least the emotional high is unmistakable. And if Biele has written a poem about religion without ever mentioning the word, what a testament to the power of language.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Rapture," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Carter is currently employed as a freelance writer. In this essay, Carter considers the poet's use of imagery and its parallels to Eastern thought.

"Rapture" is a poem of beginnings. Biele's word play gives just a taste of a moment, scene, or situation. The line "It starts" is repeated frequently through the poem as words to usher in the early morning ocean tide, to an idling motor in the early morning fog, to a knife sharpening in anticipation of use. These images are not random but are carefully arranged elements that give the work its energetic flow, or life force. What one would consider innocuous or seemingly bland details encountered in everyday life are the fodder of life, and of living, for Biele.

Biele bombards the reader with sensory images or miniature life portraits, yet these pictures are not quite complete. At the poem's outset, Biele uses imagery to evoke the dawning day on the beach, as suggested by a "low white rumbling," "a broken shell to the ear," and a "cold kiss of the sun." At another point in the work, she mentions "diked fields," an "idling motor," and "horses in the fog," which is a scenic shift that takes the imagination to a morning on the farm. This series of associations runs a twisting path along the roadside, through the woods on a fall day, or in a sail boat, rhythmically moving to an ocean's sway. The sensory clues Biele uses to set the stage for her poem are transient; they are dissections of human experience working to evoke an image that is fleshed out by association rather than description. They are also suggestive in their nature. These images alone could not paint a picture, yet together they provide a frame of reference for the reader.

John Tribble, series editor for the Southern Illinois University Press, comments on Biele's work in an online review of *White Summer*. Tribble says that "Biele investigates the problems of personal and cultural memory. Rich with images of flight and displacement, Biele's poems show a love for words, their music and physicality." He later asserts that the poet "reveals and revels in the power of language to shape and create experience."

Certainly, the sudden elation one feels stepping out onto a sunlit walk is fleeting and momentary. Biele brings readers to the edge of these moments. She defines them by texture, taste, and scent but they take no real shape. It is the harmonious union of images that reach the reader. These images are simply the beginnings of associations, of memories, making them all the more precious. These images all suggest something, and in their power to suggest, they belie that rapture is a pleasurable response beyond words, a sensation that begins and sometimes ends before one can even put pen to paper. This response to the everyday manages to transcend the everyday, transporting readers from one emotional state to another. Through her intricate, calculated, and careful word play, Biele takes readers for a ride on a wave of emotion without boundry.

Biele's poetics closely parallel Eastern thoughts on nature or the nature of things. Feng Shui is a search for balance and harmony with nature. Nature, in this instance, is not

just a collection of natural objects. In Biele's work, images of nature sidle right up next to the everyday. She carefully weaves the sensations, the beauty, the sounds of nature with man-made rhythms, of bottles falling, of shattering of glass or of the steady hum of traffic. For example, the "psh-psh of a Bach cantata" is followed by the sound one makes walking through a pile of leaves. Both have an identical pattern of sound with a succinct nature that intrinsically links one to the other.

Shan-Tung Hsu, writing in his *Fundamentals of Feng Shui*, describes these patterns as being a part of natural law, patterns existing not only in nature but in human life. "It means patterns emerging from the inner nature of things. "The entire poem is essentially a consideration of the inner nature of things. Each image has a succinct nature or pattern. Hsu explains, "The way that water moves on a surface, the way that veins form in marble, the way knots form on a tree trunk: these things have patterns that one can come to understand, that emerge spontaneously, without being forced or enforced." In Biele's work, images like "spilt sugar, a rosy ear, or birds clamoring," for example, have a succinct nature. Pour sugar from a spouted container in such a way and the granules form a soft, white pyramid. A rosy red ear has a certain fresh tint to it, whether burned by the sun or the cold. Birds clamoring make a boisterous or energetic sound.

The symbolic use of wind and water also give Biele's poem an Eastern harmony or unity. Feng Shui literally means "wind and water," the two fundamental elements of life in Eastern thought. Hsu explains that in one important Feng Shui classic called *The Book of Burials*, the nature of ch'i, the origin of all manifestations of form, is defined by wind and water. According to this important Eastern work, "Ch'i rides with the wind, is dissipated by wind and is confined by water." Consequently, says Hsu, on a metaphysical level wind and water give name to Earth's energy and represent the most dynamic and changeable forces in the world: the "ever-changing flow of manifestation, searching for dynamic balance." Ch'i is essentially "vital energy" or "life breath" in Eastern thought. The art of Feng Shui is to create a dynamic balance where ch'i, or life energy, can manifest.

Water and wind imagery give Biele's poem its dynamic balance. In the opening lines of the poem, the speaker asserts that rapture starts with "low rumbling, white static, a broken shell to the ear," following this immediately with "It starts with water, / tide pulling." Images of wind and water work together to define the ocean's tide, one of rumbling water whose sound is captured by the flow of wind through a conch shell and whose shape is dictated by the pull of tidal waters. The poem proceeds with a number of images describing rapture's inherent nature or ch'i, smatterings of water and wind imagery including wet legs, a bell buoy's sway, or a sail luffing. At the poem's end, rapture is "the body breaking into islands," then "the fall through wind lifting white leaves." A natural flow of imagery exists in Biele's poetry, one symbolically shaped by water and wind. The elements frame the poem, creating a natural flow or energy that gives life breath to delightful visual, olfactory, and tactile associations.

Biele has been compared to Theodore Roethke, a poet who reveled in nature, the nature of things, and elemental processes. Like Biele, Roethke saw parallels in nature,

in its ability to represent or expand consciousness. Similarly, Biele's images of "wet legs and poppies" and a "flower inside a tree" are reminiscent of the work of William Carlos Williams. In one of his most notable poems, Williams took an image of a red wheelbarrow to demonstrate the power a simple image can project onto the page based on its inherent nature alone. Like Biele, both Roethke and Williams advocated or supported the fundamental notion of capturing the nature of existence in the essence of things in their work.

So, too, does Eastern thought. Behind the principle of Feng Shui is an insistence on the acknowledgement of and movement with patterns that emerge from and define the world to reach a higher level of awareness. From a metaphysical perspective, Taoist teaching dictates that the highest goal is to seek balance and harmony with nature. Like Roethke and Williams, Biele achieves this goal not only by presenting a series of powerful imagery but also by pairing seemingly random images to expose an interconnectedness resonating through the entire work.

It would be a mistake to gloss over Joelle Biele's poem "Rapture" as nothing more than a collection of images. The poet's selection of elements is carefully calculated, dictated by natural law. Her poetry follows a distinctive life rhythm and is a celebration not just of nature, but of life, of the ecstasy of everyday experience one so often forgets. In these breathless thoughts and images, one discovers an energy or ch'i that transcends the everyday.

Source: Laura Carter, Critical Essay on "Rapture," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Write a poem using the word "it" fifteen times in twenty lines. To what does your "it" refer? Is it difficult or easy to describe the same thing fifteen different ways? How does the large number of uses in a short poem influence what "it" references?

Do some research on the debate over the Christian belief in the "rapture." What does it entail and what are the basic arguments for and against it? What other religions, if any, have a doctrine similar to this one?

Of all the classical music composers, why might Biele have mentioned Bach in particular in this poem? Why a "cantata" specifically and what is the "*psh-psh*" of one?

Discuss the significance of the poem's title. Would calling it "Joy" or "Happiness" work just as well? Why or why not?

What Do I Read Next?

Poet and writing professor Allison Joseph was on the committee that selected Biele's *White Summer* for the First Book Award from the Crab Orchard Review Series in Poetry. A noted poet in her own right, Joseph is the author of several collections of poems, most notably *In Every Seam* (1997). In this collection, Joseph writes about her childhood experience growing up black and female in New York City, combining stark personal reflection and powerful social commentary into a strong and accessible volume of poetry.

Elizabeth Spires, a contemporary of Biele's, is a poet whose work also highlights the wonder of ordinary moments and events. Her collection *Worldling* (1995) explores such common topics as childhood, a beach, and old bottles, and does so with intimate details and images that make one think about them in new ways.

Biele has authored articles on the work of some of America's most prominent poets, including Emily Dickinson and Adrienne Rich. In particular, Rich's intensely committed and risk-taking work seems to be a draw for many current, young women writers. Her collection *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) is an excellent introduction to her work and helped make her a distinct voice in modern American poetry as she writes of poverty, racism, sexism, violence, love between women, and human isolation.

Contemporary poet Christine Hume's *Musca Domestica* won a first-book award upon its release in 2000. The title of the book is the Latin name for the common housefly, and Hume's work takes a humorous, inventive, and highly detailed look at the life of an ordinary fly□actually, a very imaginative metaphor for the life of an ordinary housewife. Much like Biele, Hume finds fascinating moments in a humdrum world.

Further Study

Boller, Diane, Don Selby, and Chryss Yost, eds., *Poetry Daily: 366 Poems from the World's Most Popular Website*, Sourcebooks Trade, 2003.

As the title makes clear, this book is based on the Poetry Daily Website (www.poems.com), which posts a new "Today's Poem" every day of the year. The concept behind the book is that readers will read one poem a day throughout 2004—a leap year, and therefore 366 days long—and by the end of the year will have read more poetry than most people read in a lifetime. The poems selected are from the web site's first five years, and it is an admirable, eclectic collection well worth reading.

Chafe, Eric, *Analyzing Bach Cantatas*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

Classical music experts and novices alike will appreciate this insightful look at what are considered some of Western music's highest accomplishments. In clear, straightforward language, Chafe examines Bach's cantatas individually by combining theological, historical, and analytical approaches to help the reader gain the fullest experience from the music and words.

Holm, Bill, *Boxelder Bug Variations: A Meditation on an Idea in Language and Music*, Milkweed Editions, 1985.

This thin, unique compilation of poems, meditations, and essays bears a striking resemblance in its overall message to that of Biele's "Rapture." Holm uses the humble boxelder bug to comment on the importance of finding joy and beauty in the most unlikely, overlooked places and things.

Young, John E., *The Rapture Examined*, WinePress Publishing, 2003.

There are hundreds of books debating the reality, timing, and actual meaning of the Christian belief known as the "rapture." Young's book is not necessarily the best on the subject, but he attempts to offer fresh insights that aid the reader in making up his or her own mind. Young's opinion is decidedly that of a believer, but his argument is more intellectual than didactic.

Bibliography

Biele, Joelle, *White Summer*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2002.

Hsu, Shang-Tung, *Tao of Feng Shui, Book One: Fundamentals of Feng Shui*, Blue Mountain Feng Shui Institute, 1999, pp. 9—17, 59—61.

Joseph, Allison, Jacket cover of *White Summer*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2002.

Satterfield, Jane, Review of *White Summer*, in *Antioch Review*, Vol. 61, Issue 3, Summer 2003, p. 587.

Tribble, John, Review of *White Summer*, at www.siu.edu, May 5, 2004.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Poetry for Students*.

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

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

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

©1997-2002; ©2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc.

Gale and Design® and Thomson Learning™ are trademarks used herein under license.

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

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any

form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

For permission to use material from this product, submit your request via Web at http://www.gale-edit.com/permissions, or you may download our Permissions Request form and submit your request by fax or mail to:

Permissions Department
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Permissions Hotline:
248-699-8006 or 800-877-4253, ext. 8006
Fax: 248-699-8074 or 800-762-4058

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, The Gale Group, Inc. does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. The Gale Group, Inc. accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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 unnamedfor 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