A Rebirth Study Guide

A Rebirth by Faroogh Farrokhzaad

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Introduction

The strength of Faroogh Farrokhzaad's "A Rebirth" comes not only from the words and images portrayed in her poem but also from the free-flowing meter and lack of rhyme. The free verse form sharply contrasts the style of her earlier poetry and reflects the dramatic transitions the poet was experiencing in her life. As she struggled to find a new definition of self, one that could rise above the oppressive female role set upon her by her Iranian culture, she simultaneously broke through the formal structure of the traditional Iranian poetry that had previously influenced her writing. Another Iranian poet, Farzaneh Milani, writes in a critical essay published in the poetry collection *A Rebirth*, from which the poem is taken, that Farrokhzaad's newfound voice and poetic form "attest to long years of formal confrontation with language, a diligent practice of the craft coupled with years of reflection and inner unfolding." In this fourth collection of Farrokhzaad's poetic works, and especially in the title poem, she demonstrates that in her life and in her writing, she has been reborn.

"Rebirth" was first published in Iran in 1964, just a few years before the poet's death. The entire collection of poems (and specifically the title poem) was dedicated to her lover of many years, Ibrahim Golestan, an Iranian short story writer and cinematographer. Golestan was reportedly the biggest influence in helping Farrokhzaad reach this dramatic transformation in her life and in her writing style. In turn, Farrokhzaad influenced a whole generation of Iranian women, who traveled with her through her poetry in her struggle to find freedom and a new definition of life.

Author Biography

Foroogh (also spelled Forough) Farrokhzaad was born January 5, 1935, into a middle-class family in Tehran, Iran, many decades before women experienced social liberation in the United States, let alone in Iran. Some Iranian women believe Farrokhzaad was the woman who began the movement for them. Had she been an American woman, Farrokhzaad's painfully personal poems might have been startling in her time, but to have written them as an Iranian woman was absolutely unthinkable. She was the first Iranian poet to ever write about a woman's perspective of life in Iran.

Farrokhzaad was born to a family of seven children, and by the age of sixteen she was married to her cousin, Parviz Shapur, a marriage her family did not approve of. The marriage ended in 1954, and Farrokhzaad lost custody of her son, Kamyar, who was given to her husband's family. These events stigmatized her socially, leading her into an ever-narrowing sense of isolation.

From this isolation came Farrokhzaad's first set of poems, published in 1955 as *Asir* ("the captive" or "the prisoner"), when she was only twenty years old. The book was heavily criticized by the patriarchal society that surrounded her. However, women rushed to read it. In the same year, unfortunately, Farrokhzaad also experienced a mental breakdown. In an effort to fully regain her psychological strength, she spent nine months traveling through Europe, which gave her a dramatically different perspective on life, especially as seen through the eyes of European women. It was during this time that Farrokhzaad wrote the poems that were collected in 1956 in *Divaar* ("the wall"), which was dedicated to her ex-husband. Through these poems Farrokhzaad exposes the restraints she experienced while trying to play out the traditional role of an Iranian woman and wife.

Many critics of Farrokhzaad's writing have commented on a reoccurring theme that runs through her work□that of a longing for love. Some critics believe she at least partially fulfilled that need in the relationship that developed between her and Iranian short story writer and cinematographer Ibrahim Golestan, whom Farrokhzaad met in 1958. Their love affair would last until her death, despite the fact that Golestan was already married. This same affair, and several more that Farrokhzaad experienced, further alienated her from the socially respectable standards of Iranian culture. However, her poetry, which reflected the changes she was going through, became even more popular.

In 1958, Farrokhzaad published her third collection, *Esian* ("rebellion"). That same year she also worked with Golestan on several movie and documentary projects. One of those movies was *The House is Black*, which was adapted from a prize-winning story about a leper colony. During the filming, Farrokhzaad adopted a child named Hassan from the leper colony and took him back to Iran. After Farrokhzaad's death, Hassan's biological father released correspondence from Farrokhzaad, letters from which he concluded that Farrokhzaad was a very good mother.

Farrokhzaad's fourth collection of poetry, *A Rebirth*, published in the United States in 1985, was first published in 1964 in Iran under the title *Tavallodi Digar*. Critics have commented that with this collection, Farrokhzaad finally discovered her voice. As David Martin, the English translator of Farrokhzaad's collection *A Rebirth*, writes in the introduction, her untimely death at the age of thirty-two "left much of her life's work undone."

On February 14, 1967, Farrokhzaad was in a hurry, leaving her mother's home. She swerved her jeep to miss an oncoming bus and was thrown into an embankment. She died from a concussion. Her voice was silenced on that day not only for Iranian women but, as Martin writes, for "all Iranis struggling to enter, and to come to grips with, the modern world."

Plot Summary

Section 1

In the first short section of "A Rebirth," the speaker sets up the theme of her poem, that of rebirth. She first describes the general emotion that weaves through her many births and deaths. Then she defines the power of the residue of those changes that affects the people who become involved in her many transformations.

She states that her life is a dark sign, or a foreboding message, almost as if she is warning the reader or anyone who becomes involved in her life that her sadness will sweep over them; and they may suffer as she has suffered. This sign will take you, she writes, "again and again," referring to the cycle of death and birth, death and reawakening to a new life form. Her life, she insinuates, has been filled with sorrow, no matter how many times it has been transformed. And the sadness of her life will influence the "you" she addresses in the first stanza. The speaker then states that the dark sign of her life will take the person addressed "to eternal dawn / bloomings and eternal growth." It will do so through an "incantation of itself," a phrase that could denote a prayer, a chant, or even a spell that might curse the person who becomes involved in her life. "I joined you," the speaker states, "to tree and water and fire." Note that the speaker did not say that she had "joined *with* "you," but rather she merely "joined you." The speaker might be returning to the statements in the first lines of the poem and is insinuating that through association with her (because she is a dark sign) this "you" is joined to the traumatic incidents in her life, which have transformed her. She may be referring to the tree as life itself. Water might be a form of nourishment or could also reflect tears. Fire might refer to the so-called hotter emotions of anger or passion. The "you" is joined to these elements because the speaker has "versified" him or her, placed the "you" there through the poetry of her transitions.

Section 2

Section two is the longest part of the poem. In it, the speaker attempts to define life, her need for love, and the weight of her art and her loneliness.

With the word "perhaps," the speaker begins several lines in which she tries to define life. Maybe life is the everyday occurrence of a woman passing through a market. Maybe life is the tragedy of a man who hangs himself. She then mentions the ordinary action of a child coming home from school and the emotional release of "lighting up / a cigarette" after lovemaking. But then she changes her mood. She seems to lose her confidence in defining life as the speaker throws in the word "confused." Two strangers pass one another on the street and exchange a greeting. The words of this greeting, "Good morning," appear to be friendly, but the words are empty, she writes. The smile of one of the passersby is "mean / -ingless." The word "meaningless," at least in translation, is hyphenated, so at first it reads that the smile is "mean." Only as the

reader continues down to the next line is the interpretation changed from "mean" to "meaningless," which is still a little disturbing but not as intense.

In the above lines, the speaker tries to define life objectively, through observation of others. But in the next set of lines, the speaker turns to perceptions of herself. In doing so, her definition of life becomes even vaguer, more abstract, more elusive. Life becomes a "stopped instant." It becomes a gaze that "self-destructs." She compares life to her attempt to look into someone's eyes. But her gaze is stopped by the "no-no" of that person's eyes. She wants to know that person, but she cannot penetrate that person's soul any more than she can understand the moon or see in the "pitch dark." Life is not to be comprehended in this way.

The speaker next turns to her emotions. Maybe it is through her emotions that she can define life. Her heart, she writes, has been broken many times. Through her loneliness she has witnessed the "subterfuges" of her heart's "happiness." She has found and lost that happiness many times, and she compares that journey of love found and lost to the withering of a beautiful flower, to the planting of a young tree, to the "song of canaries," which might be beautiful, but the song is so small, "only as large as a window." The love she has experienced is transient. It fades; it is a mere sapling; it is a very small song. She wants a love as big as the sky, but her share of that sky "will be taken" from her as if someone had hung "a curtain over it." She knows it is there, but it is veiled, covered up, and she cannot see it.

Not only is her share of happiness veiled, it also descends "an abandoned stairwell." Whereas the sky should be overhead, implying something positive, hers descends a stairwell that no one uses any more. Her share not only descends, it rots in a place of exile. Her only remembrance of her share is in "a grief-stained stroll in memory lane." It not only is in the past, it exists in sadness. "In the sorrow of a voice," she hears it calling to her by stating, "I love / your hands." This is the poet referring to her art. It is with her hands that she creates her poetry, and it is through her poetry that she remembers her share of love, that she remembers her life. When she "plants" her "hands in the garden," she becomes alive. She grows "green," a sign of creativity, of life. She then repeats the phrase, "I know," as if someone were reminding her that it is through her poetry, through her art that she feels life most intensely. "I know I know I know," she writes, like someone who really did not have to be told; like someone who already knows but maybe does not want to hear it, or does not want it to sink in.

There are two images in the next section, "two twin dark red cherries" and "dahlia leaves / on my fingernails" that refer to the first cosmetics that a young Iranian girl can use. The red cherries are the fruit, freshly taken off a tree and dangled over the ear by its twin stems, as a sort of earring. The dahlia leaves are a substitute for fingernail polish. These images represent the coming-of-age transition when a young girl wants to attract attention from the opposite sex. Then the speaker refers to the young boys who paid attention to her, boys who "dream of / a girl's innocent smiles," or in other words, dream of a young girl's innocence. In that innocence, the speaker proclaims, a girl "was carried away / one night by the wind." This phrase implies something somewhat

negative, as if the girl were taken away against her will. Or maybe taken away without her realizing the full consequences.

Then the speaker distances herself again. She writes of a "blob impregnating the dry line / of time." A blob is amorphous, formless, and unstructured. This could mean that the person to whom the speaker refers as a blob has fallen apart. Since all of Farrokhzaad's poetry is personal, this could refer to her mental breakdown or her loss of identity she suffered as a traditional Iranian wife. It might also refer to the Iranian dress code that requires all women to drape themselves in formless clothing and veils. But it could also be an allusion to her loss of her child. The next set of lines seems to imply that it might be a little of all these things.

"The blob of a conscious image which image / is reflected back from a party mirror." With these lines, the speaker could be talking about the "self" she sees only in reflection. And that reflection is distorted. There is nothing else in this poem that refers to something as happy as a party. From everything else that has been written before this line, the speaker does not convey a spirited personality□someone who would have fun at a party. But that is how the "blob" sees herself□in a "party mirror." And through this reflection, the speaker states this is the "way / that somebody dies." And yet somebody also "remains." In looking at herself through this mirror, the speaker might be saying, a part of her dies. It is not the real her. She cannot fully see herself. She sees only a shadow of herself□the part that remains.

Section 3

The third section, like the first, is very short. The speaker makes reference to water in the last stanza, another form of reflection. She begins by describing a "piddling little old crick," a small rivulet that "flows into a ditch." This is not a nourishing source of water, for nothing grows there. There are no oyster pearls to be found, no jewels. Nothing worthwhile. This might be the speaker still searching for a definition of herself. She does not feel confident that she has any depth or any treasure "for a fisherman to catch," but she does have dreams. She knows of a mermaid, a mythical creature. That mermaid is sad, though. The mermaid lives in the ocean, a very fertile and exciting place to live. And she is an artist too, who "plays her heart" on a "wooden lip flute." She is "small," the speaker states, implying that the speaker's dream is small too. There is, however, hope. The mermaid represents the commencement of rebirth. There are possibilities here, for "she dies in the night" and "will be born at daybreak / from one kiss." The speaker returns to the concept of rebirth here. However, the transformation of the mermaid remains dependent on a kiss.

Themes

Transformation

From the title of Farrokhzaad's poem "A Rebirth," it is easy to assume that this poem will focus on transformation. The words are present in the poem to suggest a rebirth. She uses phrases like "again and again" and "over and over" suggesting the cyclical motion of death and rebirth. She also closes her poem with the description of a mermaid who "dies in the night" and is "born at daybreak." But it is possible that the theme of rebirth is misleading, or not as complete as the word and the images suggest. There is transformation occurring, at least in an abstract way, but there are also many elements that seem to linger unchanged. The speaker is constantly sad and appears unsure of her identity. It could be possible that the real transformation occurs not on a deep psychological or spiritual level but rather on a more superficial level. The speaker is searching for her identity, which definitely changes. First she is all-powerful but in a sad way, inflicting her sadness on anyone who becomes involved with her. Later, she exists only as a "blob," an undefined mass of nothingness. Sometimes she sees herself as an artist, while at other times she dreams of herself as a mermaid. The strength of this poem might not so much be in a true transformation from a lost soul to someone who is fully realized, but rather in the fact that the speaker is able to finally see all the small changes she has gone through in trying to identify herself, in trying to find a sense of happiness, and in trying to define her life. In the recognition of those changes, maybe there will be a final reckoning and more complete understanding that will create a true transformation□the full realization of the mermaid awakening to a kiss.

Search for Love

A theme that runs through most of Farrokhzaad's poetry is the search for love. Farrokhzaad is a woman who believes she is not complete unless she finds the love of a man. She is searching not for the kind of love that a young boy with a "scrawny" neck and "disheveled hair" might give her. That young boy is merely attracted to her innocence. She wants much more than that. She wants a love as immense as the sky. Something so big she will never run out of it. She wants a love that will not wither like a flower or that is as small as a canary's song. Nothing will satisfy her less than love as big as the space in which the earth is suspended. She believes that if she finds that love, she will be transformed. She will be more creative. She will become a mythical being and will die from that love but will also be reawakened. She knows about love, and she dreams about love, but she never finds it. Love is hidden from her. She knows it exists but she cannot find it. The love that she dreams of is rotting and locked away in exile. But it is this search for love that drives her. Love is the nourishment that her life needs.

Meaning of Life

As the speaker of the poem searches for love, she also tries to define life, which becomes one of the themes in this poem. What is life all about? Is life only a collection of meaningless and ordinary gestures such as shopping for food or coming home from school? Or is there more to it than that? The speaker watches strangers passing on the street and hears their empty words. She implies that most social conversation is a waste of time. Words are exchanged but they have little meaning. But then when she tries to find meaning in a more intimate relationship, she finds that her efforts are stopped. There are no answers there. Then she tries to understand life by contemplating the moon. The moon is removed from the earth and might offer her a more objective point of view. It might offer her some answers. She finally concludes that this exercise is futile, and life can no more be understood than it is possible to see in the dark. Life cannot be comprehended. A person lives it but may never know or understand it.

Depression

Another major theme in this poem is that of depressed emotions. Loneliness and sadness permeate the text, as do negative images. For example, the speaker opens the poem by referring to herself as a "dark sign," a symbol or warning of something depressing about to happen. Those who gather around her, she warns, will be affected by her depression. In the second section of the poem, the speaker offers an image of a hanged man, which she presents as a possible meaning of life. She also refers to herself as a "blob," a nothing. Even when she hints that there might be a possibility of happiness, she states that things she loves are taken from her or hidden from her. She is tricked out of her happiness. She uses the belittling metaphor of a "piddling little old crick" to describe herself. Then she states that the waters of this "crick" support no life; and no treasure is found there.

Loneliness

Loneliness is the basis for most of the sadness in this poem. The speaker searches for love because she wants to rid herself of loneliness, which is dark and fathomless. Loneliness feeds the poet's art, giving her deep emotions to explore. In order to explore them and write about them, the poet needs to be alone. The poet also creates very lonely landscapes where everyone appears alone. When she hints of two people being together, the reader is assured that there is no union created. For example, the strangers who pass one another on the street may share the stage momentarily, but they do not share warmth or companionship. They exchange only meaningless words.

There is a "you" who the speaker addresses, but there is no sense that the speaker and this unnamed character disclose anything to one another. Even in the passage "I joined you to tree and water and fire" there is a separation between the speaker and the "you," as if the speaker is watching from a distance. The word *joined* does not convey the

sense of two people coming together but rather one person (the speaker) joining another person (the "you") to the tree, as if she has glued that person there. There is also a single woman in the market without mention of any other people there, as if she is strolling by empty stalls and vacated streets. A single "kid" returns from school without mention of classmates, playmates, or family. A lonely man with a rope is about to hang himself without anyone around him persuading him to do otherwise. Even in the phrase "lighting up / a cigarette in the relaxing interval / between two / love-makings," there are no bodies, no two people coming together. There is only the cigarette and the objective act of making love. The people have been removed from this image, as if the act of love could be performed without anyone being there. Even at the end of the poem when a mermaid is introduced, she is alone. She receives a kiss before dying and another kiss at daybreak, but there is no one mentioned or identified as the giver of that kiss.

Style

Free Verse

"A Rebirth" is written in free verse, a nontraditional form of writing poetry. In free verse, there may be rhymed or unrhymed verse that is not limited to a regular metrical structure. In other words, instead of having to conform to a prescribed meter, free verse usually follows a cadence that mimics common speech. Another liberty in free verse is the line length, which may vary and may be used to heighten the emotional effect or to emphasize a particular meaning. These effects may be used to provide visual images other than just the words themselves. Although "A Rebirth" has been translated from Persian, the reader should assume that the translator attempted to mimic the effects of language use and line structure from the original poem.

In the second line of "A Rebirth," the reader may notice that the word "verse" appears on a line all by itself and is aligned flush right, thus making it stand out. In the fourth and sixth lines, the phrases "again and again" and "over and over" mirror one another, promoting a sense of repetition, such as one finds in the cyclical motion inherent in the concept of rebirth□born over and over again.

The poet also uses a break in lines 33 and 34, which causes a swift change in meaning. Line 33 is very short. There are only the words "a mean." It is not until the reader reaches the next line that the true definition of this word is completely understood. There is no hint of this switch because the hyphen that should have been attached to the end of "mean" does not appear until the next line. The hyphen is attached to the suffix "-ingless," and its appearance alters the understanding of the poet's intended meaning.

In line 35 the poet uses a space in the middle of a line to offer a visual expression of what she is trying to say. After the phrase "perhaps life is that" and before the next word "stopped," there is a gap, so that the reader can feel the "stopped instant" rather than just reading the words. In lines 70 and 74, the poet leaves the phrases "stained fingernails" and "on my fingernails" on lines by themselves and again places them flush right. They stand out because of their position and because of the repetition of the same word, "fingernails." The poet is tying them together visually in order to tie them together in meaning. The first fingernails are stained with ink, a visual image of the speaker as an experienced writer. The second set of fingernails is that of a young pubescent girl who has decorated her nails in an attempt to attract attention. By stressing and contrasting these two sets of fingernails, the poet emphasizes the passing of time and thus the transformation of the young girl to woman.

Metaphor

Another device used in "A Rebirth" is that of metaphor. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to propose a likeness between them. Instead of the speaker stating in the first line that her life is filled with sadness, she states that "her existence is a dark sign." Many other metaphors are used, such as "life / is a long avenue," giving the reader the visual image of life being a road upon which one travels. The speaker also states, "life is a rope / with which a man hangs / himself." This is a very strong and depressing image, much more depressing than just stating that life can be difficult. Later the speaker states that her share of love "is a sky." The sky is huge, maybe even infinite. Instead of merely stating that her love is big, the speaker offers a metaphor that says more than the words she uses. Metaphors expand the meaning of words. By stating that her share of love "is a grief-stained stroll in memory lane," the speaker uses only eight words and yet gives the reader the great sense of sadness and maybe even regret that she feels for all the love she once found and then lost. She is haunted by those painful memories. The grief clings to her through her memories of them.

In lines 66 through 70, the author uses an extended metaphor, giving the reader a full image of how she feels about her art. She "plants her hands" in the earth, where they eventually will turn green and become the home for swallows. In using this garden and planting metaphor, the poet explains how fruitful she becomes when she writes. It is through her hands that she experiences her creativity. In digging down into her psyche, she is able to grow, able to produce. The "swallows'll lay eggs / in deep cracks" around her fingers. Through the use of metaphor, readers can take this image and come up with their own interpretations of what the poet is trying to say. Depending on the reader's experience with gardens, different emotions and different understandings will be reached, maybe even different from those the author intended. However, if the poet had only written that she feels very good when she writes poems, the reader may have come away with only a fraction of the meaning and the emotion that the full metaphor inspires.

Historical Context

Although the time of Farrokhzaad's writing is not mentioned in her poetry, the historical events that were unfolding around her heavily influenced her emotions and thoughts and should be understood in order to fully appreciate her themes and topics. "A Rebirth" was first published in the early 1960s in Iran. By this time, Farrokhzaad had witnessed war and foreign occupation of her country. She had lived under a fearful political regime that imprisoned intellectuals and artists to muffle voices of dissent. Nationalism was the political cry during the 1950s, as Iran attempted to break free of American and British involvement in their country. Political assassinations, exiles, and finally a major coup backed by the United States and Britain followed, all of which eventually toppled the nationalist movement and gave full power to a puppet monarchy, extinguishing the hopes of many Iranian citizens who were once inspired to create a modern definition of themselves. Western culture infiltrated Iran, some aspects of which were happily accepted. Other changes were not met with much enthusiasm, and stronger enforcement was needed. New laws were proclaimed. For example, a law was passed that made it illegal for women to wear any traditional Iranian head cover. The only apparel a woman could wear to cover her head was a Westernized hat.

Modernization was superficial in terms of actual benefits to the common people. Some women, who had been raised to believe that the only proper public attire was the chador (a long, draped cape that covered the body from head to toe), gave up their jobs and even refused to go shopping, preferring to stay home rather than to be exposed in public in Western-style clothing. Poverty also rose to incredible heights, further depressing the common people.

Although the world around them was changing, Iranian women were not always included in the best benefits. For example, in 1953 Tunisian and Lebanese women gained the right to vote, and in 1956 Egyptian woman were allowed to go to the polls. Iranian women were not allowed to vote until 1980. Also, traditional marriages were still honored, in which women were often married to men whom their parents had chosen for them.

Without an outlet for their voices, women felt isolated, as if they were alone in their suffering. It was in this atmosphere that Farrokhzaad's poems were published. Hers was the singular female voice that refused to be silenced. She wrote from the personal realm, something never done before, exposing her feelings and her discontent. As some of the titles of her books (*The Captive*, *The Wall*, *The Rebellion*) signify, she was fighting for her release. Other people, both male and female, afraid to speak out, listened to her.

Critical Overview

Farrokhzaad's collection *A Rebirth* has not received a lot of critical attention in the United States. However, her impact on Iran and especially on Iranian women cannot be overstated. *A Rebirth* has been widely recognized as a major work, and Farrokhzaad herself has been recognized as a major Iranian poet.

In his introductory remarks in *A Rebirth*, translator David Martin calls this collection a "masterpiece." He continues, "Her voice was already the most significant voice in women's poetry in this century in Iran□some say she was the greatest poetess in the long history of Persian poetry." Martin's remarks are repeated by many literary critics and academics familiar with Farrokhzaad's body of work and with the influence her poetry has had on Iranians. Although, due to the nature of her topics, Farrokhzaad's poetry strongly appeals to women, Martin argues it is not only Iranian women who benefit from her work, but "all Iranis struggling to enter, and to come to grips with, the modern world."

In a critical essay published in *A Rebirth*, Farzaneh Milani relates the long history of poetry in Iran, a history that tends to ignore female writers. It was more difficult for the male-dominated cast of literary critics to ignore Farrokhzaad's work, because, according to Milani, she tended not only "to express explicitly her unorthodox convictions in poetry, but also [had] the tenacity to act them out in life." Milani writes that Farrokhzaad "challenged and rejected accepted mores and assumptions" about the traditional role of women, and she journeyed into "forbidden fields in both life and literature." Milani further states that the appeal of Farrokhzaad's poetry might lie in the fact that her writing, which is filled with "rewoven webs of passion and love," might act as a "cathartic release for what voluptuousness offers and puritanical morality withholds from many of her readers."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Hart has degrees in English and creative writing and is a freelance writer and author of several books. In this essay, Hart studies Farrokhzaad's poem from a feminist standpoint and questions the premise that this poem is about transformation.

Most literary critics praise Farrokhzaad for her bravery in writing, in a very personal and often painful way, about her emotions, frustrations, and fears. Hers was a singular voice heard in the midst of a very dark silence. Although her life's work encompasses only a relatively small collection of poems, she was able to catalog the major challenges she had to face as a woman living in a society that for the most part did not want her voice to be heard. She was strong enough to stand up for her rights when she became distraught over her marriage. Although she was ridiculed and socially exiled as a divorced woman, she was not afraid to explore her sexuality in a series of love affairs. But even if one acknowledges Farrokhzaad's courage and declares her as one of the first persons in Iran to cry out for women's rights, one has to question, when reading her poem "A Rebirth," to what kind of transformations does her poem refer?

If one were to focus only on the simplest definition of feminist theory, it might be to evaluate a piece of literature in terms of equal rights and a lack of male dominance. The premise behind feminism might be referred to as encouraging the self-actualization of women□fostering women to independently define themselves. This is a difficult challenge for women who live in a male-dominated society. Farrokhzaad fought against this dominance in her life and against the traditional laws of her society. But did she also fight against her own personal limitations in dealing with men in a one-on-one situation? Were her relationships with men on an equal standing? And if they were, how does her poem "A Rebirth" express this? What are her victories? How did she change?

Farrokhzaad dedicated the collection of poems in which "A Rebirth" is contained to her lover, Ibrahim Golestan. Her dedication to him includes the first stanza of "A Rebirth," making it very clear that this poem in particular was written for him. And it is in this first stanza that the poet's voice exhibits its most strength. This strength, however, comes from a point of weakness. The speaker begins by declaring that all her "existence is a dark sign." And this negativity will affect anyone who becomes involved with her. In their coming together, both he and she will be cursed. So in some ways, she is exerting strength, like a wizard who places a spell. But where is the real power if both she and he are affected by the "dark sign?" She may be strong in that she is at least warning him of her effects, but from where are these effects coming? Surely they are not really coming from her. Who would wish negativity upon herself? In stating "all my existence is a dark sign" is she not implying that she is a victim of her circumstances? There is no empowerment in that sentiment. Victimization is antithetical to feminism. To fight for one's rights, one has to act. Victims, on the other hand, are passive.

In the second section of "A Rebirth," the speaker turns to the task of defining life. One way she does this is to recall moments when she has gazed into her lover's eyes. When she does this, she is stopped and her "gaze lays waste to itself." She has tried to see

into her lover's soul, but the door is slammed in her face by the "no-no" of his eyes. Her gaze then "self-destructs." She has tried to visually crawl into her lover, trying to find a definition of her life in him. When he does not allow this, is it just her gaze or is it her "self" that falls apart? The reason this question arises is because of the way she words this phrase. It is not her lover who makes her gaze disintegrate. Rather her gaze "self-destructs." She has diminished her own gaze. Should the reader then assume that she can create an image of herself only through the man? Does she feel incomplete without him? Can she not create a complete self on her own? Does this mean that she is dependent on man? If so, how will she ever be self-actualized? How can she ever expect to stand up on her own? The speaker might answer these questions in the next lines, in which she concludes that she can no more make sense of her own self-destruction (or her own life, for that matter) than she can make sense of the moon.

With this thought the speaker appears to disintegrate even further. She looks at flowers in a vase and instead of appreciating their beauty, she sees only the sadness in their wilting. Instead of enjoying the young tree planted in her garden by her lover, she sees only the weakness of the sapling. And in the simple enjoyment of the song of a canary, she hears only how small the sound is. These are the things, the "simple subterfuges" of her happiness. Her happiness, thus, is also dependent on outer things. She is not gaining strength from within, but rather she waits for someone to bring it to her. But even when they do, she cannot draw energy from it. She is, after all, a dark sign, which pollutes anyone's attempt to give her pleasure.

There is one image in this poem, however, that is strong and positive. But the speaker spoils the image. The metaphor begins with the statement "I love your hands." Then it moves into a reflection of her hands planting themselves in the garden. Here is strength. Not only does the speaker acknowledge her skill as a writer, she also takes action. She does not say that someone else takes her out to the garden and sticks her hands into the soil. Instead, she plants her own hands, and she knows they "shall grow green." These lines are vibrant, as if the dark sign has finally disappeared. Her hands are filled with power and creativity. And there is also another ingredient in this section that does not appear in the rest of the poem. Here there is peace. She is so content with her hands in the soil, she is sure that swallows will come and "lay eggs / in deep cracks" around her "ink- / stained fingernails." Although "ink-stained fingernails" in any other sense might conjure a negative image, here they bespeak her productivity as an artist. But even here, there is one flaw, although slight. The speaker plants her hands on the impetus of "the sorrow of a voice," a voice that tells her it loves her hands. For this image to be more complete, more full of energy and a sense of self, it would have been better if the speaker had supplied her own inspiration for going to the garden.

The weakest image in this poem is the speaker referring to herself as a "blob." In her favor, however, she does state that this image comes from her past: "my heart has stolen away / from my childhood's neighborhoods." So if there is any transformation, any rebirth symbol in this poem, here it is. Although she may still rely on a man to define her, that certainly is stronger than seeing oneself as a blob, a nothing.

But even by the end of the poem, even if she has transformed herself from a blob, she has changed into a form that is not much more elevated. In the last section of this poem, the image she uses is a "piddling little old crick / which flows into a ditch / no pearls there for a fisherman to catch." This metaphor does not conjure up greatness. Rather, it entails little more than the runoff from a quick rain. There is a trickle of water but no life is sustained by it. The product of its short-lived efforts is to fall into a ditch, not a stream. It gathers nothing and then disappears. No one bothers with it because there is nothing to be gained in it.

And finally, the last image is that of a "small sad mermaid." Here is Farrokhzaad's chance to celebrate rebirth. She hints at it, but the effort falls short. She summons a mythological creature, half woman, half fish, maybe much like Farrokhzaad herself, caught between two worlds. She cannot fully enter either one because she is not equipped to breathe on the land and yet she is lost without companionship in the water. The speaker repeats herself, emphasizing the smallness and the sadness of this little mermaid, who is dependent on a kiss. One kiss places her in the dark sleep of the dead each night. The other kiss awakens her in the morning. Or in the speaker's words, "she will be born at daybreak / from one kiss." And here, in the final lines of this poem, the concept of rebirth is presented. But the concept is not concluded. Does the sad little mermaid die each night? And is she reborn every morning? Does anything change? Does she grow? Does she find happiness? And even if she does, even in the last line of this poem, the mermaid is dependent on that kiss. Someone has to come, someone has to plant his lips on her cheek. Someone has to feel sorry for her and ultimately revive her.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "A Rebirth," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Select another Middle Eastern country, such as Saudi Arabia or Jordan, and compare the contemporary women's rights movement there to that in Iran. Do women have the right to vote? What are their roles in government, education, and science? Are there women in positions of power?

Farrokhzaad published her poetry between the 1950s and the 1960s. What other female writers were being published in Iran at that time? What female poets have been published since the 1960s? How do their works compare to Farrokhzaad's? Do they lean toward the traditional or are they looking for change? Are their subjects personal or do they speak in abstractions?

In the 1950s, the United States and Great Britain were involved in the affairs of Iran. Trace the relationship between Iran and the United States from the 1950s to the present day. Include information about the 1953 coup and how that affected Iran. Also research the American hostage-taking that occurred in 1979. Other topics you might explore include the Iran-Contra Affair and early-twenty-first-century fears that Iran might be developing nuclear weapons.

Read the poetry of Sylvia Plath and compare her work to that of Farrokhzaad. Do you find similarities in their depression? How did each poet deal with her depression? What common themes do you find in their work?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: American and British intelligence agencies help to overthrow Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, who wants to nationalize Iran's oil companies. The overthrow consolidates the power of Shah Mohammad Pahlavi, who favors foreign involvement in Iran's oil production.

1970s: The Iranian revolution, lead by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a religious leader, forces the shah out of power.

Today: Madeline Albright acknowledges the United States's involvement in the 1953 coup, coming closer to apologizing to the Iranian people than any other U.S. official.

1950s: Iranian women wear Western-style clothing and cosmetics in public.

1970s: Miss Iran beauty pageants are held in Iran. The winner goes to the Miss Universe contest, which includes a bathing-suit competition.

Today: Women are forced to wear *chadors* (long capes, dark in color, which cover women from head to toe) and *hejabs* (head coverings) whenever they appear in public.

1950s: The Iranian film industry is dominated by melodramatic movies and comedies, commercial projects with no political statement and little literary merit.

1970s: In the years preceding the 1979 Iranian revolution, a group of artists and intellectuals enjoy a new wave of cinematography. Movies of social consciousness are produced, such as the Dariush Mehrjui's film *The Cow*, about the affects of poverty.

Today: Under strict governmental grading systems, Iranian movie production is heavily censored, but the industry is growing not only in numbers but also in international praise. Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf are two of Iran's most famous directors.

What Do I Read Next?

Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers (1992) contains works by Farrokhzaad, Tahereh Saffarzadeh, Parvin E'tessami, and Tahereh Qorratol'Ayn. The book covers 150 years of the tradition of women writing in Iran. This book was written by Iranian poet Farzaneh Milani, who teaches literature in the United States.

In *A Feast in the Mirror: Stories by Contemporary Iranian Women* (2001), edited by Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, modern Iranian women writers demonstrate that their world is both distant and yet not too dissimilar from the Western world.

Nahid Rachlin's book *Veils: Short Stories* (1992) was listed as one of the 500 best books written by women. Her collection portrays stories of Iranians living in their homeland and abroad, and covers topics such as family and friends, love, and war. Most of the focal characters are women who explore the effects of their culture on their lives.

For a study of classical Persian poetry, *The Hand of Poetry: Five Mystic Poets of Persia* (2000) is a good place to start. Included in this book are poems of Sanai, Attar, Rumi, Saadi, and Hafiz, some of Persia's best male poets.

Wounded Rose: Three Iranian Poets (1980) is a collection of some of Iran's best modern poetry. Poets in this collection are contemporaries of Farrokhzaad and include Simin Behbahani, Nader Naderpour, and Yadollah Royai.

Susan Atefat Peckam was born to Iranian immigrant parents, and her award-winning poetry is filled with images of women affected by both American and Iranian cultures. Her poems have been collected in *That Kind of Sleep* (2001).

Further Study

Dumas, Firoozeh, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America*, Villard, 2003.

Dumas relates the story of her family coming to the United States from Iran when she was only seven years old. With lighthearted humor, she points out the challenges of living in a country whose culture is dramatically different from her own.

Farmaian, Sattareh Farman, and Dona Munker, *Daughter of Persia: A Woman's Journey from Her Father's Harem through the Islamic Revolution*, Anchor, 1993.

Farmaian was the child of an Iranian Prince and the fifteenth of his thirty-six children. She lived a somewhat protected life in Iran until she became too politically involved and was sentenced to death. She escaped Iran and moved to the United States, where she wrote her memoir.

Hillmann, Michael C., *A Lonely Woman: Forugh Farrokhzad and Her Poetry*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987.

This is the only biography and study of Farrokhzad that has been published in English.

Nafisi, Azar, *Reading "Lolita" in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, Random House, 2003.

An Iranian professor, tired of the restrictions placed on the books she and her students were allowed to read, organized a small group of women to secretly read Western literature. This is a highly praised memoir of how Western literature changed these women's lives.

Reed, Betsy, ed., *Nothing Sacred: Women Respond to Religious Fundamentalism and Terror*, Nation Books, 2002.

In Reed's collection, such important writers and feminists as Arundhati Roy, Barbara Ehrenreich, Karen Armstrong, Gloria Steinem, Eve Ensler, Susan Sontag, Ellen Willis, and Laura Flanders discuss the oppression of women in the name of religious fundamentalism.

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Martin, David, "Introduction," in *A Rebirth*, Mazda Publishers, 1997, pp. ix—xiii.

Milani, Farzaneh, "Formation, Confrontation, and Emancipation in the Poetry of Foroogh Farrakhzaad," in *A Rebirth*, Mazda Publishers, 1997, pp. 123—33.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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