Reunions with a Ghost Study Guide

Reunions with a Ghost by Ai

Contents

Introduction

Since the publication of her first book, *Cruelty*, in 1973, Ai has established a reputation for writing poems that express the cruel way that people in close relationships behave toward each other. Her poems are uninhibited in their presentation of sex, death, and the darker side of human desire. Often they are narrated by troubled, anonymous speakers, sometimes poor people or those who are otherwise on the margins of society. Ai does not shrink from expressing unsavory and shocking truths; she presents the difficult emotions and destructive acts of her speakers without condemning them.

"Reunions with a Ghost" first appeared in Ai's fourth collection of poetry, *Fate*, which was published in 1991. The speaker of the poem is an anonymous woman who tells of her troubled relationship with the man she is in love with. It focuses on a particular incident that begins in disillusionment on the part of the woman, progresses to an act of lovemaking, and culminates in what appears to be the couple's final separation, although other interpretations might be possible. The emotions expressed range from contempt to love, passion, sadness, and puzzlement; the poem reveals the difficulty that men and women have in forming a successful intimate partnership. Although Ai's ethnic heritage is African American, Asian, and Native American, there is little in this poem that indicates the ethnicity of the two people involved. In that sense the poem is universal in the way it depicts hope, disillusionment, desire, reconciliation, and separation.

Author Biography

Ai was born Florence Anthony on October 21, 1947, in Albany, Texas. Her father was Japanese, and her mother (who was not married to him) was a mixture of Choctaw Indian, southern Cheyenne, African American, Dutch, and Irish. Ai was raised as a Catholic by her mother, and she and her halfsister attended Catholic school until seventh grade. She recalls that when she was a child, her family was very poor, and her stepfather, Sutton Haynes, needed to borrow money so he could buy food for the family. After living for a period in San Francisco and Los Angeles, the family moved to Tucson, Arizona, in 1961, when Ai was fourteen. By that age, she had discovered through a poetry competition at school that she could write poetry. Her earliest poems were all imitations of Edgar Allen Poe, to whose work she had been introduced at school.

After graduating from high school, Ai attended the University of Arizona, where she continued to write poetry. It was there that she changed her name to Ai, which is the Japanese word for love. It was also at the University of Arizona that she met the poet Galway Kinnell, when he gave a reading. Ai sent some of her poems to Kinnell for his comments, and he encouraged her to apply to the writing program at the University of California at Irvine. After graduating in 1969, with a bachelor of arts degree in Japanese language and literature, Ai did indeed go on to graduate school at Irvine. It was during her graduate career that she decided that she wanted to write in the language of the common person, and her goal was to make her work as accessible as possible. She received a master of fine arts degree from the University of California, Irvine, in 1971. During her second year at Irvine, Kinnell showed her poems to an editor at Houghton Mifflin, and the result was her first book, *Cruelty*, published in 1973.

Recognition for Ai's work came quickly. She was a Guggenheim fellow in 1975, and a Radcliffe (now Bunting) Institute fellow in the same year. She was awarded a Massachusetts Arts and Humanities fellowship in 1976, and was visiting poet at Wayne State University 1977-1978. A second volume of poems, *Killing Floor*, followed in 1979. This volume was chosen as the 1978 Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets.

Ai's third collection of poems was *Sin* (1986), which won the American Book Award, and this was followed by a fourth collection, *Fate*, in 1991. In 1993, her fifth collection, *Greed*, was published by Norton, as was *Vice: New and Selected Poems*, in 1999. *Vice* was a collection of previous work along with seventeen new poems, and it won the 1999 National Book Award for Poetry.

Ai was writer-in-residence at Arizona State University from 1988 to 1989, and visiting associate professor, 1996-1997, at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In 1999, she became a tenured professor at Oklahoma State University.

Plot Summary

The first line of "Reunions with a Ghost" refers to the first night of God's creation being too weak, an obscure idea that quickly turns in lines 2 and 3 into a concrete image of a woman in a cobalt blue dress falling on her back.

Line 4 introduces the speaker of the poem for the first time, and she reveals that she is the woman referred to in the earlier lines. She also says that she survived the fall, although what she is referring to is not stated. It then becomes apparent that the speaker is addressing someone, a man, who is her boyfriend, lover, or husband. It is clear that she was at some point in love with him. She was prepared to make sacrifices and put his needs above her own ("I lived for you"). Apparently she is still doing so, since the next line (6) is in the present tense, indicating that the relationship is still in existence. However, the speaker's anger and dissatisfaction with her partner are clear, as she accuses him of not caring about whatever sacrifices she makes for him. Then she complains that he is drunk again, which appears to be a common occurrence, and is lost in a world of his own, turned in on himself.

In line 8, the speaker summarizes the way her lover complains about his own life. He believes that no one's troubles are as bad as his own. Apparently to demonstrate his misfortune, he unzips his pants to show her the scar on his thigh. The scar is a visible reminder of the injury he received when he was hit by a train at the age of ten. The man talks about the incident with wonder, but also with a contempt that is aimed at himself. He feels guilty because he was not killed in the accident. He thinks he deserved to die.

The speaker of the poem kneels and touches the scar as the man stands in front of her with his eyes closed. His pants and underwear are now at his ankles. The woman slides her hand up his thigh and touches the scar. This is a sexual overture. The man shivers and grabs her by the hair. They kiss and make passionate love on the floor, although the speaker comments that metaphorically speaking they never touch the floor. It is as if they are borne aloft by the ecstasy of the lovemaking.

When their sexual intercourse is over, the speaker says that nothing has changed between them, and she wonders about the nature of their relationship, which seems to puzzle her. Is it love or friendship that "pins us down / until we give in?" She seems to be asking what is it that continually draws them together in a sexual relationship. Whatever union and intimacy they gain during sex does not last, the speaker says. Afterwards they quickly retreat to the safety of their own separate lives.

In line 35, the woman says that her lover is now sober once more, following the sex. He dresses and sits watching her putting on her makeup. They go outside and kiss goodbye. The man departs, carrying whatever it is that haunts him and makes his life turbulent ("arm in arm with your demon").

The speaker reflects that she has once more endured the ordeal of loving, by which she seems to mean not sex but the intimacy of relationship. She feels sane and wise as she

watches her lover walk off. Then he turns back, and she sees in his eyes a look of acceptance and recognition. He appears to be certain that they will meet again "from time to time," although the word the speaker gives to him is not "meet" but "collide." This suggests that he is aware that any encounter between them, whether sexual or otherwise, is going to be stormy.

But it appears that the speaker has something else in mind. The emphatic repetition of "Yes. Yes," regarding the farewell she gave him suggests that she meant this as a final parting, even though he appears to believe something else.

Themes

The main theme of the poem is the failure of love. The title hints at the story that unfolds, much of which is not stated explicitly but lies under the surface. "Reunions" suggests that in the relationship between this couple, there is a pattern of partings and reunions. The word "ghost" possibly refers to the man, who is only a ghost of what the woman once thought him to be (perhaps when she first fell in love with him). "Ghost" may also refer to the relationship itself, which is just a shadow of what it once was and continues in spite of the fact that, at least from the woman's point of view, there is no rationale for its continued existence.

Perhaps the theme might also be described as the hostility of intimacy, since although the word *love* is used, it does not seem to characterize the relationship, at least as it exists in the time frame in which the poem takes place. The woman seems to have only contempt for her drunken, complaining lover, with his self-pitying attitude and his demand for sympathy. However, she does show love in one particular gesture, and that is when she touches the scar that for the man is the visible sign of the fact that the world (so he appears to believe) has not dealt with him fairly. This is an act of acceptance on the part of the woman. It seems to say that she accepts him for what he is, and perhaps by doing that she seeks to make him whole once more, for there is no doubt that she loved him once, since she says as much. As she touches the scar, he shivers, as if she has indeed touched a vital core of him; she has reached him where his pain lies deepest. The man is obviously a wounded personality, riddled with guilt over something that happened in his childhood that was probably not his fault and over which he had no control. No doubt that guilt is deeply embedded in him, giving him low self-esteem and chronic insecurity.

But the impression the poem gives is that this gesture of touching the scar is something of a ritual between them: he whines about his circumstances, she comforts, consoles, and touches. They make love and all is healed for a short while. But then the troubles start again. This is certainly what happens in the sexual act described in the poem. Sex is just an escape, a temporary mask that covers the sadness at the heart of this relationship, which has reached a point at which it cannot continue any longer (although the man has yet to realize this). At least the physical act of sex provides some temporary exhilaration for this troubled couple, freeing them from their usual boundaries ("we just go on and on tumbling through space"), but even in this there is disappointment. The two "bits of stardust," an image that suggests that their copulation is lifting them into some exalted, cosmic realm, is immediately undercut by the phrase "shed no light." The mechanical nature of the act becomes apparent in the impersonal "it's finished," as if an involuntary physical spasm or process has simply played itself out. The description of their sexual act, as well as the prelude to it, suggests that it is not an outgrowth of a healthy love relationship, but something indulged in out of habit and necessity. The intimacy it provides is illusory; it changes nothing, as the woman explicitly states: "Nothing's different, nothing." This is also obliquely suggested in the previous line, "our descent, our falling in place," which describes the end of their lovemaking. The phrase "falling in place" puts in mind "running in place," an activity in

which a person may expend a lot of energy but not actually go anywhere. The retreat into private, separate selfhood that follows is simply the final nail in the coffin. (There must have been many hammered in before this last one.)

All that remains to be said after this final failure of intimacy is goodbye, but even in that simple act this couple cannot communicate. Although the woman is clear in her own mind that she meant it when she said goodbye, the man appears certain that there will be more meetings, more "collisions," between them.

Style

The poem is in the form of one long, unrhymed verse paragraph, and the diction (the words and phrases used) is largely the language of common speech. Most of it is literal description, although there is also some figurative language, as when the lovers are compared to stardust tumbling through space. The major cluster of images in the poem comes in the first four lines:

The first night God created was too weak;
it fell down on its back,
a woman in a cobalt blue dress.
I was that woman and I didn't die.

These lines may appear puzzling, and they do not permit a definitive explanation. The God who creates the first night is presumably an allusion to the book of Genesis, in which on the first day of creation God separates the light from the darkness, calling the light Day and the darkness Night. In the poem, the night is "too weak," falls down, and is then metaphorically equated with a woman who is then revealed to be the speaker of the poem. The woman falling on her back is an image of sexual surrender as well as simple weakness. Perhaps the allusion to God and the first night hints at night as the feminine realm, which is overwhelmed by the "day world" of masculine consciousness, but this is not really necessary for an understanding of the poem.

Historical Context

Ethnic Diversity

When "Reunions with a Ghost" was published in 1991, the American literary, social, and political landscape was marked by the need to express the ethnic diversity of the nation. Each ethnic group, whether African American, Asian American, or any other people of color, sought to affirm their own identity, in distinction from the dominant white culture that has tended to marginalize all voices other than its own. Feminists and gays also played a part in this explosion of diversity and multiculturalism, whether based on ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. This movement began in the 1960s and has gathered force in each succeeding decade

. Ai, who is half-Asian, part African American, and part Native American, as well as possessing some European blood, has been in a unique position to express the multicultural experience, to say what it is like to be a person of mixed race in contemporary America. Literary scholars and theorists refer to this as the attempt to create a discourse that empowers oppressed peoples. However, it is not a role that Ai has embraced. She says that she does not write as a black person or as a member of any other minority. Some black and feminist writers have criticized her for this, but she insists that she does not want her work to be catalogued in this way. She prefers to create poems that are universal in their meanings.

Changing Roles in Relationships

There is no racial element in "Reunions with a Ghost," since the ethnicity of the two people is not stated. But the poem does reflect difficulties in intimate relationships between men and women that were particularly apparent in 1990s America, and which continue to the present day. A frequently quoted statistic indicates that half of all recent marriages in the United States are likely to end in divorce, and in the 1990s, the United States had the highest divorce rate in the world. The divorce statistics are related to wider social changes that have been going on since the 1960s. During that time, the number of women in the workforce increased dramatically, and this played a large part in breaking down traditional ideas about the roles of men and women in marriage. In the 1950s family, the role of the husband was to earn money to keep the family, whereas the wife looked after the home and raised the children. But a survey in 1994 showed that less than one person in four agreed that these were still the appropriate roles for men and women. In the absence of generally agreed upon roles for the sexes in close relationships, many couples found that they had to negotiate their own way to a successful partnership. The negotiation might have to cover everything from who pays for the dinner date to whose career is given priority and who does the majority of the housework and childcare. Although this has led to many new ideas about how to create successful partnerships that are in keeping with the temper of the times, it has also led to much unhappiness and failure.

The difficulties in relationships between men and women, and the need for new understanding, were reflected in popular culture. In the early 1990s, there were a number of best-selling books that sought to educate people about the differences between the way men and women think, feel, and behave. These included *You Just Don't Understand* (1991), by sociolinguist Deborah Tannen, which explained the difference in conversational styles adopted by men and women and how failure to recognize the differences leads to miscommunication. Another popular book was *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (1992), by John Gray, which argued that couples must acknowledge and accept the differences between men and women before they can develop happier relationships.

Critical Overview

"Reunions with a Ghost" was first published in Ai's fourth collection of poetry, *Fate* (1991), where it was overshadowed by the new direction that the poet's work was taking. Most of the poems in *Fate* are dramatic monologues written from the point of view of famous figures in American culture, such as General Custer, Lenny Bruce, Jimmy Hoffa, and James Dean, and it was those poems that tended to catch the attention of reviewers. They stand in contrast to the narrator of "Reunions with a Ghost," who is an unnamed, ordinary woman, not an icon of American culture. In this respect, "Reunions with a Ghost" is closer to Ai's earlier work, in books such as *Cruelty* (1973) and *Killing Floor* (1979), which contain many poems written from the point of view of anonymous narrators who endure difficult lives.

Reviewers expressed reservations about the effectiveness of many of the dramatic monologues of the famous in *Fate*, and Penny Kaganoff, in *Publishers Weekly*, felt that "obscure lives make better material, as in 'Reunions with a Ghost,' a love poem that effortlessly and beautifully finds a resolution without enduring a full-blown socio-cultural exposition." In a favorable review of *Fate*, Rochelle Ratner, in *Library Journal*, commented that "male and female characters are equally pitiful, yet the poet's strength rests in her ability to avoid wallowing in sympathy for them."

"Reunions with a Ghost" was one of ten poems from the sixteen in *Fate* that Ai selected to be reprinted in *Vice: New and Selected Poems* in 1997, suggesting that it may prove to be one of her more enduring poems.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey interprets Ai's poem as one of the most tender poems in all of her work, an affirmation of the power of love, even the flawed love of two imperfect people.

The depiction of intimate relationships between men and women at one crucial moment of revelation is an important element in Ai's work, particularly in her first book, *Cruelty* (1973), as well as in "Reunions with a Ghost." Frequently, this moment is not a comfortable one, either for the protagonists or the reader. Ai's vision is tough and unsentimental; the speakers of these poems refuse to put on an acceptable social mask; they reveal the unvarnished, sometimes brutal truth as they experience it. The images employed are often raw and violent. They show the dark and dangerous impulses that dwell in the human psyche and which rise to the fore when a crisis erupts in personal relations. Often, the only way for the characters to grasp at some kind of union or intimacy is through sex, and the poems emphasize the down-to-earth, unromantic physicality of the sexual act. ("I'll pull, you push, we'll tear each other apart" is how it is expressed in "Twenty-Year Marriage.") Sex may also simply be a brutal act involving dominance and submission, as in "Recapture," narrated from the male point of view, in which a woman tries to escape from a man but he captures her and beats her. She does not resist, and the result is a violent and coerced coupling that hints at some kind of reconciliation, but entirely on the man's terms:

Going back, you stumble against me
and I grab your wrist, pulling you down.
Come on, [b□□] of my love, while it is still easy.

In an interview with Lawrence Kearney and Michael Cuddihy (in *American Poetry Observed*, edited by Joe David Bellamy), Ai highlighted an important aspect of these poems, which might otherwise be missed:

The distinction between my "sex-and-violence" poems
and others you might read is that in mine the
characters love each other. The poems are not hate
poems. A lot of women's poetry approaches the
theme of trouble between men and women in terms
of hatred, I think, or "giving it to the man" in the
same way that men have given it to women□and I
never wrote from that point of view.

The first title Ai considered for *Cruelty* was "Wheel in a Ditch," which conveyed the idea of people who are stuck in a metaphorical ditch in their lives, unable to pull themselves out and move forward. Yet Ai also said that what she was striving for in all her poems was "transcendence. . . . no matter what the characters go through, no matter what their end, they mean to live."

Sometimes transcendence refers simply to the characters' attempts to overcome the oppressive, tragic nature of their circumstances and affirm who they are, or who they believe themselves to be, even if their self-identity might be considered morally unacceptable by society. In the poems about intimate relationships, the transcendence sometimes hinted at is of a kind that would lift the characters out of the messy complexity of their relationships in which conflicting individual wills and desires continually collide. This kind of transcendence can be found, for example, in "Twenty-Year Marriage" in which the speaker craves that she and her husband will be able to shake off the accumulated boredom of twenty years together by energetic lovemaking in a very unromantic setting (a pickup truck that is stuck in a ditch):

Come on baby, lay me down on my back.
Pretend you don't owe me a thing
and maybe we'll roll out of here,
heaving the past stacked up behind us;
old newspapers that nobody's ever got to read
again.

The desire here is for one moment of intense experience (which happens to be through sex) that annihilates the weight of the couple's long history together. All the accumulated hurts and betrayals (perhaps no more than what most couples rack up during a long relationship) are transcended, and the relationship becomes fresh and whole once more. However, this is only a wish, a thought in the speaker's mind, and it is qualified by the words "pretend" and "maybe," which suggests that she fears it may be out of reach.

These recurring concerns of Ai's□sex, intimacy, transcendence, and violence□are all found in one form or another in "Reunions with a Ghost." Although it can be read on one level as a poem of loss and failure, it also permits a more positive interpretation. It is in fact one of the most tender poems in all of Ai's work, an affirmation of the power of love, even the flawed love of two imperfect people.

This affirmation is present early on, in that the first five lines can be read as a kind of mystic sexual surrender in love on the part of the woman to the man. She gave herself to him completely, but she does not view this as a death ("I didn't die"), because in that act of devotion and self-sacrifice, she has found herself in a new way, with her whole life redirected ("I lived for you"). This is the ultimate experience of love, when the boundaries of self-interest and self-need are at every minute overcome in the desire to serve the beloved one. Disillusionment followed, however, and the woman now complains about the behavior of her lover. And yet as the man reveals to her his pain, as he must have done many times before, she overcomes her frustrations and her anger.

The actions of the man at this point can also be seen as expressions of love and trust. Although he is wallowing in self-pity, he is also open to the woman not trying to hide his wounds. The scar on his thigh that he reveals to her is more than physical; it also stands for every emotional wound he has ever suffered. And he trusts the woman with this, perhaps because she has healed him before through her love.

In touching the scar, the woman indicates that she accepts his pain, his disfigurement, in whatever form it takes; she will not turn away from him simply because of what he has suffered. He knows this, and he stands in front of her, immobile, as if waiting for the moment when he will be saved from himself, from the torment of his own separateness and guilt, from the shame that he feels about his own life. The origins of this shame are not revealed, but it is clear that his shame runs deep, and he seeks escape from it in alcohol. This is a man who habitually turns inward on himself, away from life, looking back into the pain of the past. The woman with whom he is involved in this turbulent partnership is the one who is capable of dragging him out of his funk and allowing him to face the world, however painful that might be.

Whereas the speaker in "Twenty-Year Marriage" merely hoped for transcendence through sex, this couple come closer to achieving it:

We kiss, we sink to the floor,
but we never touch it,
we just go on and on tumbling through space
like two bits of stardust that shed no light.

The images of tumbling through space suggest a kind of freedom□or loss of the usual boundaries of self□through sexual ecstasy, as if the lovers are borne aloft in defiance of the law of gravity (although the image of stardust that sheds no light somewhat undercuts this sense of spiritual liberation through sexual acts). When the lovers come back to Earth, the speaker's comment, "Nothing's different, nothing," is ambiguous. It could refer to her complaints earlier, in which case she may be saying that the lovemaking has failed to alter anything about this unsatisfactory relationship. On the other hand, she may be saying that after these moments of regained intimacy, she realizes that her feelings for the man are exactly the same as they always were□as they were when she first fell in love with him. Sometimes feelings do not change, whatever strains are placed on them and whatever the rational mind might decide about what it ought to feel. If the latter interpretation is preferred, the woman's statement becomes a powerful affirmation of the bond of love that connects her to this man. It can be tested but not broken.

That is not to say it is easy. There are images of violence in the poem (you "grab me by the hair," for example, which does not sound like the most tender of sexual initiatives), but for the most part they are muted, far more so than in many of the other poems by Ai that deal with sexual love. The potential for violence is instead displaced into the mental rather than the physical realm, in the struggle between them for shared intimacy. The language in which the speaker recalls their sexual encounters suggests combat, war, and struggle. They are pinned down (like wrestlers) until they "give in" (like wrestlers forced into submission). Afterwards they rise "defeated once more" (like a boxer rising after failing to beat the count) and enter a "sanctuary" (like refugees from a war).

Whether the love is in fact defeated depends on how the last line of the poem, "Yes. Yes, I meant goodbye when I said it," is interpreted. It may be that the woman is emphasizing the fact that she is closing the door on this relationship for good,

contradicting the man's apparent hope of future meetings. But there is another possibility. Her first "yes" could be a response to his certainty "that we must collide from time to time." She responds in the affirmative: yes, this will indeed happen. Then her thought returns to her goodbye, and she says, "Yes, I meant goodbye when I said it," meaning, although I meant it when I said goodbye, I no longer mean it. The emphasis falls on the second phrase, not the first. In terms of the narrative, this would imply that when the woman looked into the man's eyes for what she thought was the last time and saw in them acceptance and resignation, her heart softened, and she could not maintain her resolve to separate. The pull of love was too great.

Perhaps the different interpretive possibilities presented by the final line is a reminder that poetry, like drama, is a spoken art. Aloud, a reader has a choice in that last line to convey one of two quite opposite meanings, and on that choice may well rest the understanding of the theme of the poem.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "Reunions with a Ghost," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

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 looks at the poem twofold first, to suggest a possible identity of the man to whom it is dedicated, and, second, to consider why it is a love poem in spite of the unromantic, sordid episode it describes.

Ai is one of those poets that most readers tend to be very opinionated about. One either loves her work or despises it, quite often for the same reason. Her subjects primarily center on sex or violence sometimes both. Her language is plain-talk and usually crude, and her presentation is at once shockingly explicit and carefully honest. The most common form of poetry she employs is the dramatic monologue, in which she takes on the voice of a famous or infamous person, living or dead, and fabricates a story from that individual's perspective. The stories derive from a little bit of fact and a whole lot of fiction. Not all of the speakers in her monologues, however, are real people. Some of these speakers simply give voice to characters she has created, typically murderers, abused women, rapists, child molesters, and so forth. "Reunions with a Ghost" is generally considered one of the latter. But, what if this poem is subtly based on the same people who are more obviously portrayed in the poem that precedes this one in the collection? There is plenty of evidence that points to the possibility. But there is a second aspect here that is perhaps even more worthy of exploration. "Reunions with a Ghost" depicts a sexual act that seems to have little to do with love. As with most Ai poems about men and women, the people within it may be violent, brutish, even disgusting, but they still manage to save a place for love.

The book in which this poem first appeared, *Fate*, is a collection of dramatic monologues, including such speakers as Mary Jo Kopechne (who drowned when a car in which she was riding with Senator Edward Kennedy plunged off a bridge in 1969), Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Hoffa, General George Custer, and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. The poem based on the highly publicized sex scandal that brought about the downfall of evangelist Jim Bakker is called "Eve's Story," but it is more an embellished tale of Tammy Faye and Jessica Hahn, Jim's "other woman," than of the biblical wife of Adam. This lengthy poem alludes to many sordid details of the Bakkers' lives from Jim at the pulpit to Jim with his pants down, from Tammy's makeup to her mixture of feelings for Hahn and it makes an interesting lead-in to "Reunions with a Ghost." Perhaps it is just a coincidence, but the dedication line under the title of the "Reunions" poem is "For Jim." The first line, "The first night God created was too weak," immediately expresses a religious theme, which quickly blends with the speaker, a woman, describing the beginnings of a sexual encounter. The tension, attraction, and volatility between religion and sex were greatly exploited by the media during the Bakker affair, and it is the kind of controversy that typically inspires an Ai poem. The lines "I was that woman and I didn't die. / I lived for you" are reminiscent of Tammy Faye's tearful, public diatribes on her faithfulness to a man who had betrayed her and her determination to overcome the grief.

Whether evangelist Jim Bakker was ever struck by a train at the age of ten is unknown, but it is not unusual for Ai to introduce seeming "facts" (or exaggerations on reality) to emphasize a theme. What is more poignant about the train, the scar,and the "wonder and self-contempt" is that the "you" in the poem reflects the same remorseful, selfloathing confessions that Bakker did when his sins were discovered. The speaker in "Reunions with a Ghost" says, "you didn't die / and you think you deserved to," echoing her own declaration that death is not an option. It also suggests that the guilt felt by a supposedly God-fearing man who strays from the tenets of his belief is enough to make him think he should be dead. Bakker expressed similar remorse□not going so far as to want to die, perhaps, but certainly sounding very ashamed and selfdeprecating. After the sexual encounter, the speaker refers to her and the man's "descent" and "falling." These two words aptly describe the downfall of high-profile celebrities, especially those in religious offices who are expected to be above the temptations of the flesh. "Falling from grace," of course, has been around since the story of Adam and Eve.

If the supposition that the "Jim" and the "you" in this poem refer to evangelist Jim Bakker and that the woman speaker must be Jim's ex-wife, Tammy Faye, still seems dubious, consider a couple more hints that emerge toward the end. Tammy Faye Bakker's signature look was (and perhaps still is) the extremely heavy makeup she wore, especially on her eyes and cheeks. Here, the speaker claims that, after the physical activity, she must "go through the motions of reconstruction□ / reddening cheeks, eyeshadowing eyelids" while the man passively looks on. One more religious allusion makes the supposition more tempting: as the man and woman part, she watches him walk away, "arm in arm with [his] demon." With all the media coverage of the Bakker affair, it became common knowledge that Jim's "demon" was a weakness for the flesh, something Tammy Faye acknowledged and, supposedly, something for which she forgave him.

Whether there is any validity in suggesting "Reunions with a Ghost" is a poem whose characters are founded on the Bakkers can be answered only by the poet herself. The only claim here is that the basis for it is certainly plausible, given that the previous poem in the collection is unquestionably about this infamous couple and the other woman, so perhaps the inspiration carried over into a second work. Perhaps not. While the mental musing may be simply an exercise in conjecture, it is also stimulating to take a more serious look at the poem's subject matter□regardless of who the characters are□for it belies something that Ai has claimed is true about the men and women who stock her poems with pain, violence, greed, anger, and less-than-romantic sex: they really do love each other.

In various interviews and articles, Ai has compared her "relationship" poems to those of other poets who, like her, do not shy away from portraying graphically violent and sexual scenes to reflect the most base real-world situations that others may find too disturbing or embarrassing to write about. She has also attempted to distinguish her work from poems that leave only impressions of brutality and hatred and nothing more. In her poems, she claims, there *is* something more, and, while it may be difficult to find what that something is in a great deal of her poetry, at least in "Reunions with a Ghost" the evidence is not too obscure.

The first several lines in this poem depict a very roguish character on the part of the man the "you" whom the female speaker addresses. Until line 10, all the reader knows of him is that he is a drunk who has dumped his lover only to return to her for a quick, possibly forced, sexual encounter. The language is startlingly brash, reflecting the man's attitude and behavior: "Nobody has trouble like I do, you tell me, / unzipping your pants." The reader's first impression here is that this self-centered ruffian is about to have his way with a woman who "lived for" him, whether she wants it or not. The scene takes a sudden turn when it is revealed that there is another reason he has unzipped his pants. The scar that he displays on his thigh, which apparently the woman is already familiar with, lends an air of vulnerability to an individual who before seemed nothing but ruthless and savage. His weakness is further exposed in the revelation that he speaks of the scar "with wonder and self-contempt" and that he believes he "deserved" to die when the train struck him. The scene becomes pathetic as the woman describes him next: "you just stand there / with your eyes closed, / your pants and underwear bunched at your ankles." Within only a few short lines, the poem has transformed the character of the man from an aggressive, drunken fiend to a helpless, if not humiliated, child forced to show his wounds to the world. Perhaps this is the "something more" that saves the poem. Perhaps without it, the man, the woman, and the entire premise would remain one-dimensional, predictably flat with violence, cynicism, and hate its only themes.

About midway through "Reunions with a Ghost" a hint of love does indeed creep into the otherwise questionable scenario. The line "We kiss, we sink to the floor" is downright romantic, even if it is surrounded by the more aggressive "you shiver / and grab me by the hair" and another allusion to the scar that neither of them will touch. What follows may not be the ideal dream of a beautiful relationship, but there is a sad kind of tenderness in the portrayal of this couple "tumbling through space / like two bits of stardust that shed no light." After sex, all the woman can do is ask, "Is it love, is it friendship" that has drawn them into this intimate encounter, but the question is one that will not be resolved. Nor does it seem that it will ever go away. The cyclical nature of these sexual episodes is evidenced in the confession that the speaker and her lover always "give in, / then rise defeated once more," only to go their separate ways until they meet again, whether for sex or for love. It seems that the latter is how the speaker would describe it, although she seems almost pained in her admission that what she has just "come through" is the "ordeal of loving once again." *Ordeal* is not exactly the word one normally wants to associate with love.

Those opinionated readers mentioned earlier who find Ai's work too topical, too hateful, too graphic, or too offensive may have a good argument with certain poems, but "Reunions with a Ghost" is not likely one of them. Granted, it may start out that way the reader is lured into believing that the encounter about to happen is going to be fast, selfish, violent, and, most definitely, loveless. Then, the poem turns, and the reader senses confusion and puzzlement over the strange tenderness of the woman's submission and her analysis of her own position. She claims that she is "sane, whole, wise," while her lover is left with only "acceptance, resignation." Yet, both of them are certain that they "must collide from time to time," and there is no indication that there is an alternative. Surely, this kind of undeniable passion unwholesome as it may seem reflects some kind of love, even if it is based more on need than true affection.

The last line of the poem only emphasizes the futility of this volatile couple's inescapable attraction to one another. The speaker says she "meant goodbye" when she said it, but she has apparently said it so many times that her conviction is worthless. One can only assume that her ties to this dubious lover are woven in something stronger than the scenario their actions indicates. Something that may actually be called love.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Reunions with a Ghost," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

What are the underlying roles that the man and the woman in "Reunions with a Ghost" expect each other to play? Are these typical or atypical gender roles? Do the characters fulfill the roles or do they rebel against them?

Write a paragraph describing how the woman reveals her character during the course of the poem. What sort of woman is she? How would you describe the character of the man, as seen through the woman's eyes?

What does the speaker mean when she says, "I have come through the ordeal of loving once again?" What do you think she has learned?

Is the mental and emotional makeup of men inherently different from that of women, or are the differences purely a result of social conditioning?

Write a free verse poem from the point of view of the man in "Reunions with a Ghost," describing the same incident. Remember that people can remember and interpret the same events in very different ways.

What Do I Read Next?

A Japanese novelist much admired by Ai is Yukio Mishima, whose masterpiece, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (translated by Ivan Morris, 1994), first published in Japanese in 1956, is about the burning of a temple in Kyoto by a disturbed Buddhist in 1950.

Ai has said that her greatest inspiration comes from fiction, especially Latin-American fiction. She is particularly enthusiastic about Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970), which inspired her poem "Cuba, 1962."

Ai is an admirer of *Beyond Heart Mountain*, poems by Lee Ann Roripaugh (1999). Roripaugh is part Japanese, and these highly acclaimed poems give voice to the Japanese immigrants of the American West.

Some readers, including Ai herself, have seen a kinship between her work and that of Norman Dubie. Dubie's *Mercy Seat* (2001) contains many of the poems he has written in a period of over twenty years (to a chorus of critical praise), beginning in the late 1960s, as well as a number of new poems.

Edited by Gerald Costanzo and Jim Daniels, *American Poetry: The Next Generation* (2000) is an anthology that features the work of many of the best American poets born since 1960.

New Selected Poems by Galway Kinnell (2001) is a collection of poems written over a period of twenty-four years by one of America's foremost contemporary poets, who was also one of Ai's first mentors.

Further Study

Erb, Lisa, "An Interview with Ai: Dancing with the Madness," in *Manoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall 1990, pp. 22-40.

This is an interview in which Ai speaks of her treatment of eroticism.

Hueving, Jeanne, "Divesting Social Registers: Ai's Sensational Portraiture of the Renowned and the Infamous," in *Critical Survey*, Vol. 9, No. 2, May 1997, pp. 108-20.

Hueving discusses Ai's poetic portraits of famous figures such as John F. Kennedy and Jimmy Hoffa and how these characters are juxtaposed with nameless characters such as dissatisfied wives, priests, and vengeful mothers.

Ingram, Claudia, "Writing the Crises: The Deployment of Abjection in Ai's Dramatic Monologues," in *Literature Interpretation Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 2, October 1997, pp. 173-91.

This is an analysis of how Ai explores the prevalence of violence in modern life by reminding her readers of their cooperation with the violence in language and culture.

Kilcup, Karen L., "Dialogues of the Self: Toward a Theory of (Re)Reading Ai," in *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1998, pp. 5-20.

Kilcup discusses Ai's treatment of sexual violence and female identity in terms of feminist literary theory and criticism.

Mintz, Susannah B., "A 'Descent toward the Unknown' in the Poetry of Ai," in *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Summer 1995, pp. 36-46.

This is an analysis of many of the dramatic monologues in Ai's *Fate* as revealing the voicelessness of a multiethnic woman. Her poetry perpetually reveals that the convergence of gender, class, and ethnicity deprives women of color of their voice.

Wilson, Rob, "The Will to Transcendence in the Contemporary American Poet, Ai," in *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Winter 1986, pp. 437-48.

This discusses Ai's books *Cruelty* and *Killing Floor* in terms of Ai's attempt to transcend her ego through

assuming a masked identity, while still affirming her own identity over the world of death.

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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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