September Study Guide

September by Joanne Kyger

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

□September,□ by the American poet Joanne Kyger, was first published in Kyger's collection *All This Every Day* in 1975. It has since been reprinted in *Going on: Selected Poems, 1958-1980* (1983) and *As Ever: Selected Poems* (2002). All three volumes are currently in print.

Kyger began her long poetic career as a young woman who moved to San Francisco in 1957 at the time of the literary movement known as the San Francisco Renaissance. There she was influenced by such poets as Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan and made friends with the □Beat□ poets, including Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg. Kyger has continued to publish her poems in a career that spans more than forty-five years.

□September□ is an oblique poem; it hints at meanings rather than stating them outright. Kyger is interested in the way the mind connects one thing after another, and she does not feel that all the connections should be spelled out. Like many of her poems, □September□ moves from outer to inner realities. It is primarily about spiritual revelation, the moment when perception is lifted above the ordinary, everyday world into some new dimension of life.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1934

Joanne (Elizabeth) Kyger was born on November 19, 1934, in Vallejo, California, the daughter of Jacob Holmes (a career navy officer) and Anne (Lamont) Kyger. When Kyger was young, the family moved around frequently because of her father's naval career, but when she was fourteen, the family settled permanently in Santa Barbara, California. Kyger attended high school in Santa Barbara and Santa Barbara College (now University of California, Santa Barbara) from 1952 to 1956, although she left college one course short of a degree. Introduced to the poetry of William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot at college, she soon discovered that she wanted to be a writer. Moving to the North Beach district of San Francisco and working at a bookstore by day, she would write poetry in the evenings and take it to The Place, a bar in North Beach where the bohemian poets of the San Francisco Renaissance gathered. Kyger's mentors were Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan, and she also made friends with the poets Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, and, later, Robert Creeley and Allen Ginsberg.

Many of the San Francisco poets of the day made trips to Japan, and in February 1960, Kyger embarked for that country. Shortly after her arrival, she and Snyder were married. Kyger recorded their life in Kyoto and their trip to India (January to May 1962) in her *Japan and India Journals 1960-1964* (1981; reprinted as *Strange Big Moon*, 2000). Kyger and Snyder were divorced in 1964, and Kyger returned to America feeling freer to chart her own poetic course. Her first collection, which included work dating back to 1958, was *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965). The book was illustrated by the painter Jack Boyce, whom Kyger married in 1966.

In the next few years, Kyger traveled to Spain, France, Italy, and England, returning to San Francisco, by way of New York, in 1967. In San Francisco, she worked for a year on the KQED Artists in Television series. In 1969, Kyger and Boyce moved to Bolinas in Marin County, California, which became a center of literary activity during the 1970s, with Kyger as a leading voice. Kyger's marriage broke down in 1970, and Boyce died in 1972.

Kyger's poetry collections during this period were *Joanne* (1970), *Places to Go* (1970), and *Desecheo Notebook* (1971). The last named was the result of a trip to the island of Desecheo, near Puerto Rico, in 1971. *Trip out and Fall Back* followed in 1974. Later collections include *All This Every Day* (1975), which contains the poem □September□; *The Wonderful Focus of You* (1980); and *Up My Coast* (1981). *Mexico Blondé* (1981) was inspired by trips to Chiapas, Mexico, in 1972, 1976, and 1981.

Two selections of Kyger's poems have appeared, bringing her work for the first time to a larger readership: *Going on: Selected Poems, 1958-1980* (1983) and *As Ever: Selected Poems* (2002). Both volumes include □September.□ Kyger's collection *God Never*

Dies: Poems from Oaxaca (2004) was published by Blue Press of Santa Cruz, California, in an edition of three hundred copies. It was inspired by a visit Kyger made to Oaxaca, Mexico.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-7

□September□ begins with the poet's early morning observations of the late summer or autumn landscape. Although no specific location is mentioned, it is probably in California, perhaps in Bolinas, north of San Francisco, where Kyger was living when she wrote this poem. The descriptions are simple: the grass is light brown, the ocean shimmers, and horses graze. A motionless fleet of ships can be seen, tranquil in the morning light.

Lines 8-14

This straightforward scene prompts the poet to reflect on her thoughts. It appears that some time in the recent past she spoke in church, although she does not disclose what she spoke about. She says that it was not because of a desire to be released that she spoke, although she is silent on what she might have wanted to be released from. From burdens? From worries? From her existence in time? She does not say. What prompted her to speak appears to be a memory of childhood, perhaps, or an earlier time in her life: □memory of the way it used to be in / careless and exotic play.□ This suggests that she is looking back to a freer, happier time. The next line, which offers some kind of description about that careless play, is cryptic: □when characters were promises / then recognitions.□ This could perhaps refer to a time as a child, when she was just learning to read. Each □character□ (that is, letter of the alphabet) seemed to hold a promise to the child, which blossomed into recognition when she learned to put characters together to create or to read words. The poet seems to use that memory as a springboard to hint perhaps at a free-flowing way of being in which the solidity or fixedness of external things is not absolute.

This hint is carried into the line that follows, in which the poet states the first of the two paradoxes around which the poem appears to revolve: □The world of transformation / is real and not real but trusting.□ The first phrase establishes that the world is not fixed; it is in transformation. At one level, the statement is obvious, since in nature everything is in flux, in process of transformation (which may be particularly noticeable in the autumn, with its sense of the things of nature passing away). At another level, however, the phrase indicates the power of the human mind to transform the world it perceives. This is suggested by the sentence □The world of transformation / is real and not real.□ In other words, the □real□ world that humans perceive is, in a sense, created by the fluid consciousness of the perceiver, and it is therefore not □real□ in the sense of permanently existing outside the perceiving self. The poet must trust in the validity of her own perceptions, which create the world anew in each moment. She will return to this idea at the end of the poem.

Lines 15-17

Next, the poet addresses the reader directly, in the form of a question, □Enough of these lessons?□ This suggests that she has suddenly become aware that she may have been burdening the reader with her speculations, her reflections. As she continues, she asks another question, not of the reader this time but of herself: □I mean / didactic phrases to take you in and out of / love's mysterious bonds?□ The question mark implies that the answer to the question is not wholly known to her. It is as if she is watching the process of her own mind, observing the thoughts that arise, and then thinking aloud about their significance. The hint at □love's mysterious bonds□ is not elaborated on, but it indicates perhaps that the poet's metaphysical musings cannot be divorced from the binding and unifying power of love.

Line 18

The second paradox of the poem follows, and it is given a line all to itself: □Well I myself am not myself.□ The poet seems to say that there may be more than one self. Perhaps she means that there is a surface self that belongs to the ego, one that gives a person his or her sense of individuality separate from other people, and another, deeper self that possesses a more universal awareness and is not attached to the individual ego. The paradox is important because it seems to be the second self, the self that is not the usual self, that provides the poet with her final, visionary insight in the last lines of the poem.

Lines 19-23

The poet then speaks of a □power of survival□ that is □not made of houses.□ She seems to be saying that the usual way in which people try to ensure their survival and security, by building or buying a house and establishing themselves in society, is not the power she is talking about. Houses relate to the external world, and the use of the word here may have a particular irony for California residents, since California is a region affected by earthquakes, which can destroy a house in a few moments. The power of survival the poet refers to is something within, an □inner luxury,□ the vision of which is described in the last three lines. It appears that it can be defined only by poetic images, of golden figures with dusky skin, who perhaps exist in some other-realm accessible only to the person who is awake inside.

Themes

The Power of the Mind

The themes of the poem are presented obliquely, but there is a strong suggestion of the power of the alert, open human mind to penetrate beyond the mundane reality that the senses perceive. The poem therefore moves from outer to inner realities. It starts with the poet's observations of the external scene, a pleasant landscape in September, but then quickly moves beyond that as the poet gives her attention to the processes of her own mind. Her attitude is open and nonrestrictive. She appears to be ready to play with concepts, ideas, and memories as they come up and allow them to take her to new perceptions. There is a hint halfway through the poem about the □world of transformation,□ which suggests an inner process that will happen if the poet (or reader) has the ability to trust, which means not trying to force the outcome but allowing the process to happen naturally. The process culminates in the kind of visionary perception conveyed in the last three lines:

It is inner luxury, of golden figures

that breathe like mountains do

and whose skin is made dusky by stars.

This is an expansive inner landscape, in contrast to the unremarkable outer landscape described in the first seven lines of the poem. These final images cannot be logically explained; they are suggestive of some vast, precious, perhaps almost godlike reality (□golden figures□) that is as solid as mountains and as infinite as the stars and which is imbued with life and breath. In that sense, they are metaphors for an expanded, transformed state of inner being that feels spacious and unbounded, free of the normal petty contents of the ego-bound mind. From the mundane sight of grass and ocean, the poet has opened herself to a cosmic reality that can be described only in transcendent images. The suggestion is that the inner eye that can perceive such realities is altogether superior to the limited outer eyes with which the poet began.

The Paradox of Being

The paradox □I myself am not myself□ suggests that the everyday self, that sense of □I□ that humans carry around with them at all times, is not the ultimate reality. Indeed, it may have no reality at all. Kyger has been a longtime practitioner of Buddhism, and there is a hint in this paradoxical line of the Buddhist belief that the concept of an independent, continuously existing self is merely an illusion perpetrated by the individual ego. In reality, there is no permanent self, only a kind of void, or emptiness, lying behind the constant stream of shifting thoughts and perceptions. It is this moment of realization, when the ego disappears, that opens the way for the startling, transforming images with which the poem concludes. For a Buddhist, the way the world and the self are perceived

in the state of nirvana (a state of being beyond the confusions of the ego) is very different from the way they are perceived in the state of samsara (ignorance), in which the ego seems real.

A similar paradox occurs earlier in the poem: □The world of transformation / is real and not real,□ which suggests the Hindu concept of maya. Maya is the belief that the world as normally perceived is an illusion, since only Brahman, the eternal omnipresent reality, is real. Everything else is impermanent and therefore unreal.

These two paradoxes of being suggest the reversal of values on which the poem turns, from the material to the nonmaterial worlds. The reversal is implied by the phrase □inner luxury,□ which seems to refer back to the allusion to □houses□ in the previous line. The poet rejects all material realities as providing no □power of survival.□ Only spiritual realities are true, however mysterious and indefinable they may be. They have a power to meet the real needs of human life, in contrast to the materialism with which most humans try to ensure their security.

Style

The poem does not have a formal structure of rhyme and meter. Punctuation is sparse, particularly in the first fourteen lines, and conventions of typography are not always observed. (For example, not all the sentences begin with a capital letter or end with a period.) However, that does not mean the poem lacks structure, and it is a structure that appeals to the eye as much as the ear, through the way the poem is laid out on the page. The lines are artfully arranged to reflect the thematic movement of the poem from outer to inner realities. The first five lines, which record the placid autumnal scene, appear as a single block of text, with the first words of each line having the same left-hand margins. This arrangement corresponds to a fixed landscape□one that is what it is and cannot be altered. But in the remainder of the poem, as it moves from outer world to inner world, the placement of the lines varies considerably. The variety reflects the loose, unstructured, free-flowing quality of the poet's mind, as it leaps or glides unpredictably from thought to thought. The process even begins with the arrangement on the page of the last two lines of the initial landscape (□Here and there horses graze / on somebody's acreage□), which suggests that the poet's thoughts are already starting to move away from the landscape into her fluid inner world.

Another effect of using varying margins is to vary the amount and the position of white space on the page. The splitting up of the poem into nine short verse units, ranging in length from one to five lines, also creates expanses of white space on the page that give the printed appearance of the poem a □roomy□ or airy quality. Such spaces suggest metaphorically the initially unapparent activity of the mind as it moves around within itself and then emerges with new perceptions and thoughts. When the poem is read aloud, the white spaces, as well as the varied placement of the lines, should be conveyed by the pauses of the speaking voice. Such pauses point to the processes of the working mind as well as the rhythm of the poet's breath, as silence gives way to the bubbling up of thoughts from within.

Historical Context

San Francisco Renaissance

The San Francisco Renaissance is the name given to the explosion of a new kind of poetic activity that began in San Francisco in the mid-1950s. It marked a reaction against the dominance of formal, academic poetry in favor of freer, more experimental forms. Poets associated with the new movement included Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Robert Duncan, and Jack Spicer. On October 7, 1955, several of these poets participated in a famous poetry reading at Six Gallery. It was the first public reading of Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*, which was published the following year by City Lights Books. City Lights was a bookstore and small publishing house set up by another San Francisco poet, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who would go on to publish many of the □Beat□ poets, as Ginsberg, Snyder, and others became known. *Howl* called attention to the side of American life that did not fit in with the prosperous conformism of the 1950s (□I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical naked□). The poem created a wave of excitement throughout the American literary scene, as did the novel *On the Road* (1957), by Jack Kerouac, who had been present at the famous Six Gallery reading. *On the Road* was an account of Kerouac's travels in California and Mexico. Its rebellion against middle-class norms made it synonymous in the public mind with what became known as the □Beat generation.□ The Beats were the forerunners of the □hippie□ generation of the 1960s. According to Bill Berkson, in his article on Kyger in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, □The San Francisco art-and-poetry world in the late 1950s and early 1960s was a charged mixture of excitement, fun, pills, alcohol, highly principled criticism, megalomania, insularity, and sophistication.□

Often meeting at The Place, a bar in North Beach, the Beats and other poets of the San Francisco Renaissance not only championed freer lifestyles but also sought out new ways of transcending mundane, day-to-day reality, often through drugs but also through Eastern forms of spirituality, such as Zen Buddhism. Snyder was particularly known for his serious interest in Zen, an inclination that was shared by Kyger. Kyger was one of the few women associated with the San Francisco Renaissance, although she was younger than the others and in 1957, when she arrived in San Francisco, had not yet established herself as a mature poetic voice. Her mentors were Duncan and Spicer. Spicer was an eccentric, but influential poet who taught a workshop entitled □Poetry as Magic□ at the San Francisco Public Library in 1957. He also published *J*, a mimeographed poetry magazine, which printed the work of poets who were not well known. Kyger's first poems appeared in *J*. Spicer did not consider himself a Beat poet, believing that Ferlinghetti and others had become too commercial. He published his own uncopyrighted work in very small editions and did not allow them to be sold outside San Francisco. Sometimes he would simply give them away at readings.

Public readings were a major feature of San Francisco's literary culture during this period, many notable ones being organized by the Poetry Center at San Francisco

State. The poets believed in the importance of spoken poetry as a way of connecting poet to audience in a more direct, visceral way than through the printed word. Kyger's first public reading took place at the Beer and Wine Mission on March 7, 1959. Spicer helped her to arrange the reading, and she later looked back on it as a significant moment in her poetic career.

The Bolinas Poets

In the early 1970s, many California poets, including Kyger, lived in Bolinas, a small town north of San Francisco. These poets, who included Robert Creeley, Bill Berkson, David Meltzer, Philip Whalen, Anne Waldman, and many others, gave rise to what was called the Bolinas group or, even more grandly, the Bolinas Renaissance. They did not form a school in the sense that they shared the same poetic philosophy. Some were Beats from San Francisco, while others had been part of the Black Mountain School, associated with North Carolina; there were also some poets of the New York School. In Bolinas, many of them became involved in local environmental issues. In 1970, City Lights published an anthology of Bolinas poets titled *On the Mesa*. A few years later, Berkson, who was a friend of Kyger's, founded the magazine *Big Sky* as a forum for Bolinas poets. He also published books under the Big Sky imprint. These books included Kyger's *All This Every Day* (1975). The Bolinas group lost momentum in the late 1970s, when many of the poets left. Kyger, however, remained and still lives in Bolinas.

Critical Overview

□September□ was first published by a small poetry press in 1975, and it was not until it was reprinted in Kyger's *As Ever: Selected Poems*, published in 2002 by Penguin, that it became available for a larger readership. *As Ever: Selected Poems* was Kyger's most significant publication to date and brought her achievements as a poet over a period of more than forty years into clear view. The collection was received enthusiastically by the reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*, who hailed Kyger's □belated, ecstatic debut on the national stage.□ The reviewer remarked on Kyger's capacity for □hippie dizziness□ but also □level-headed surprises,□ as well as her □genius for moment-by-moment description.□ Referring to a quality of her verse that has perhaps restricted a greater appreciation of her achievement in academic poetry circles, the reviewer commented: □Though formalists may object to her apparent artlessness, Kyger's obsession for detail draws on a passionate intelligence that is seldom trivial.□

Kyger is perhaps most appreciated by other poets. David Meltzer, who has known Kyger for more than forty years and was himself a member of the San Francisco Renaissance, wrote the introduction to *As Ever: Selected Poems*. Although he does not comment directly on □September,□ the following observation might be applied directly to it: □Her work demands and awakens attention to the extraordinary, the so-called 'everyday'; daybook moments written by a highly selective eye / I selectively and attentively annotating what's before and beyond her eyes.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a PhD in English and has published many articles on contemporary poetry. In this essay, he shows how Kyger's study and practice of Zen Buddhism influences the spiritual search that is at the heart of her poetry.

Kyger's poetic stance is one of openness to the momentary fluctuations of perception and thought. She is ready, should the moment strike, to be opened up to a different, fuller way of experiencing herself and the world, but she prefers not to force such experiences. Although her manner can sometimes be playful and lighthearted, she is, in fact, a serious and uncompromising seeker of truth in the momentary here and now. The results of her quest are often tentative and fleeting; they are never dogmatic. Her poetry hovers on the brink of spiritual revelation, of a sudden breakthrough in consciousness, but it can just as readily fall back into the mundane and the everyday. Her poems have an air of spontaneity about them that is not illusory. Kyger does not like to revise her work much, as she told the interviewer Dale Smith in the online literary magazine *Jacket*:

When you □get going□ in the process of writing, there's a breath and rhythm that starts to build up inside; the song starts singing, the vowels fall into place with the breathing and rhythm. When you try and re-stress and re-do the words and lines, it's very hard to re-create the original brightness. That's why it's nice to get it close, as close as you can the first time.

Like many of the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, Kyger was strongly influenced in the 1950s and 1960s by Zen Buddhism, and her poems offer occasional glimpses or hints of the condition Zen describes as satori. D. T. Suzuki, who in the 1950s was the foremost expert on Zen in the West and whose writings first introduced this spiritual tradition to the San Francisco poets, describes satori as □an intuitive looking into the nature of things.□ It is □the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistically trained mind.□ In the moment of satori, or enlightenment, □our entire surroundings are viewed from quite an unexpected angle of perception.□

This mode of experience illuminates not only Kyger's poem □September□ but also a number of other poems that she wrote at about the same time, during the 1970s, and published in her volume *All This Every Day* (1975). Like □September,□ □A small field of tall golden headed grass□ begins with an observation of the outer landscape but then quickly moves inward, into the poet's mind. The mood is more somber than □September,□ and the poet reproaches herself for not being more open to life. But then, at the end of the poem, as in □September,□ there is a moment of transformed perception. The outer world is suddenly seen in a completely different light, and this also represents the expanded inner world of the poet:

But then in the sun, looking out to sea,

center upon center unfold, lotus pearls,

the boundless waves of bliss

This passage well illustrates another of Suzuki's descriptions of satori, as a □turning of the mental hinge to a wider and deeper world.□ The imagery in the poem is explicitly Buddhist, since in Buddhist symbolism the opened lotus signifies full enlightenment and mental purity. The lack of a period at the end of the poem suggests that the waves of bliss are indeed boundless and without end. According to many spiritual traditions, this is the true nature of the mind when it is no longer attached to the individual ego. It has become free of the endless cycle of desire that produces only suffering.

Like □September□ and □A small field of tall golden headed grass,□ □April 4 1975 Time of wonder□ begins with the contemplation of a landscape and then moves to the poet's own thoughts. This time the poet waits for a moment of revelation that, unlike in the other poems, does not happen:

The same landscape only changed

by progression of time. Waiting to be moved

by the impulses of heaven. To have the chance funnel

descend. Into the grassy bird lit day.

Just as the lack of punctuation in the earlier poem indicates the boundless nature of the mind, here the unexpected period after □descend□ emphasizes that the □chance funnel□ (the moment of altered or enlightened perception) is for some reason blocked. The mind will not flow freely. The day is □bird lit□ but not illumined by any light from another dimension of life. The remainder of the poem emphasizes the heavy entanglements of human life that make spiritual vision nearly impossible.

The frustrations and disappointments of seeking authenticity in life, of trying to see herself and the world truly, are often apparent in Kyger's poems of this period. Spiritual discipline, in the form of Zen meditation, is not easy. □It is true, there is power within us. But I am so / improperly trained,□ she laments (□It is true, there is power within us□). Sometimes she questions the nature of the ego that seems to provide a sense of security but blocks spiritual vision: □What is this self / I think I will lose if I leave what I know□ (□It's a great day□). Frustration with the spiritual path is also the theme of □The far off pine whose branches turn yellow,□ which is yet another poem that begins with a landscape in a particular month (in this case, June) and then moves inward, to the poet's mind. But as in □April 4 1975 Time of wonder,□ there is no moment of epiphany or breakthrough at the end of the poem, only fruitless effort:

Oh I am so tired, in this little room,

trying to open the path of rhythm with rhythm, positively

breathing

Kyger refers at once to the practice of Zen meditation, which involves putting attention on the breath, and to the practice of writing, in which she attempts to put what is known as the □breath line□ on the page. This term derives from the poet and critic Charles Olson, who was an early influence on Kyger. Olson argued in his influential pamphlet □Projective Verse□ that the unit of poetry was not the traditional metrical foot but the breath of the poet, which conveys his or her particular voice. The way the words are arranged on the page should reflect the rhythms of breathing and of thinking. It was Olson who taught Kyger to discard straight left-hand margins in favor of varied placement of the poetic line, a method Olson called □field composition.□ (Kyger remarked in her interview with Smith, □It's so boring to pick up a book of poetry and see that left-handed margin going evenly up and down the page like a little platoon of soldiers.□) When the poem is seen as a field, it becomes akin to a musical score, in which the varying line lengths and placements indicate the entire aural structure of the poem, with its varying pauses and degrees of emphasis.

This attention to the placement of lines is apparent in another of Kyger's Zen-like poems that probes the nature of the self, □Is this the Buddha?□

Is this the Buddha?

That individual will die

that day dream

Individual.

The short lines seem almost to float in an expansive free space. Since they are short, they should be read slowly, with plenty of pauses for breath. Pausing will allow for the contemplation of the idea that the individual self is an illusion, no more than a daydream, to sink in and allow the possibility of deeper understanding to emerge in the second part of the poem. This deeper understanding involves the revelation that there are two selves, one temporary and illusory and the other permanent and real. It is the same implication that is contained in □September,□ when the poet states, □I myself am not myself.□

This frequent exploration of the paradox of the self in Kyger's poetry also informs the witty □No one was watching the tortillas.□ The poem well illustrates Suzuki's comment that □The Zen masters . . . are always found trying to avail themselves of every apparently trivial incident of life in order to make the disciples' minds flow into a channel hitherto altogether unperceived.□ The poet is engaged in the thoroughly mundane activity of watching tortillas as they cook, when it appears that a moment of satori comes, as if from nowhere. The ordinary day-to-day self disappears for a moment:

No one was watching the tortillas.

You were.

That's my new name. No one.

In this □tiny pause□□a suspension of time in a moment of eternity□illumination comes: □I am Beautiful.□ The poem, which must be read aloud for its full effect, concludes

See I am It. I am getting It.

I am the big rolling breathing, sliding

sighing, lifting,

Ground!

As will be clear from this discussion, it is no easy thing to convey through words the nature of satori. Kyger is not limited by the concepts and symbols of Zen Buddhism, and she also draws on Native American and shamanistic imagery. During this period in her poetry, she is fond of using the word □golden□ to express a kind of perfection beyond the everyday world. There are the mysterious □golden figures□ in □September,□ for example, which puts one in mind of the well-known story of the Han emperor Mingdi, who in a.d. 68 had a vision in a dream of a golden figure. Told by his ministers the next morning that he had seen the Buddha, Mingdi dispatched an official to India to find out more about Buddhism, which eventually led to the establishment of Buddhism in China.

Continuing with Kyger's use of the word □golden,□ in □Who even said I was a poet□ are the lines □And the sky who is my father / opens the world of the golden kingdom.□ In □When I used to focus on the worries,□ another moment of self-forgetting produces a flurry of visionary images culminating in □The streets become golden.□ In □Often I try so hard with stimulants,□ □golden□ is associated with truth: □Whereas the real state is called golden / where things are exactly what they are.□ There may be a joke lurking here, since California, where Kyger lives, is known as the □Golden State.□ But the last line well expresses the main thrust of Kyger's spiritual quest, which is to be aware, in fleeting moments that may come without warning and apparently without cause, of the clear light of truth.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on □September,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Why were the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance attracted to Zen Buddhism? What does Zen offer that is not found in the Judeo-Christian tradition?

What is poetry for? What is the role of poetry in America today? Does poetry fulfill any useful function in society?

Write a poem with varying line lengths and varying placement of the lines on the page; that is, do not use straight left-hand margins. Try to ensure that line breaks and line placements are not arbitrary but are necessary for the effectiveness of the poem. In what ways would your poem differ if it had straight left-hand margins?

Write a poem that starts with a description of a landscape, moves on to your own thoughts as they arise, and ends with an unexpected perception or realization. Try not to force it, just let the thoughts flow out spontaneously.

Compare and Contrast

1970s: The Watergate scandal leads to the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon in 1974. Along with American failure in the Vietnam War, this leads to a mood of cynicism and pessimism in the nation. People tend to mistrust government.

Today: Republicans and Democrats alike decry the □big government□ programs of the 1960s and 1970s. However, reducing the size of the federal government proves to be no easy task.

1970s: Throughout the decade, there is a heightened concern for preserving the environment. The first Earth Day is celebrated in 1970, and Congress passes legislation to ensure preservation of clean air and water.

Today: The Bush administration loosens many federal environmental regulations. Environmentalists claim that the administration favors the interests of big business and that the result will be an increase in pollution.

1970s: Abortion rights are guaranteed in the landmark Supreme Court decision *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973.

Today: In a highly conservative political climate, anti-abortion activists step up their campaign to have *Roe vs. Wade* overturned.

What Do I Read Next?

Kyger's *Strange Big Moon: The Japan and India Journals: 1960-1964* (2000) is a journal of her stay in Japan as well as her four-month visit to India in early 1962, when she was a young poet married to Gary Snyder. In these years, Kyger was developing her poetic sensibility and her Buddhist practice, which would become central to her life.

Philip Whalen, who wrote *Overtime: Selected Poems* (1999), was a leading member of the San Francisco Renaissance and a friend and mentor of Kyger's, as well as friend of Snyder, Ginsberg, and Kerouac. He later became a Buddhist monk and was appointed dharma sangha (head monk) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1984. Whalen belonged to no poetic school, and his work differed from those of the Beats. It is known for its reverence for the mundane world, sense of humor often turned on Whalen himself, and apolitical stance. This collection is organized chronologically and covers all periods of his work.

Brenda Knight's compilation *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists and Muses at the Heart of Revolution* (1996) is an anthology of the life, times, and writings of forty women from the Beat era. This volume includes a bibliography for each woman, anecdotal information, and rare archival photographs. It also features commentary by Anne Waldman and Allen Ginsberg.

Richard Peabody's *A Different Beat: Writings by Women of the Beat Generation* (1998) also examines the role of women during the Beat era. Although some of the writers Peabody covers are the same as those selected by Knight, there is little overlap because the works selected are different. This anthology includes work by lesser-known writers like Bonnie Bremser and Fran Landesman and excerpts from unpublished memoirs by two of Jack Kerouac's former wives, Frankie □Edie□ Parker and Joan Haverty.

The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations, 1952-1998 (2000), by Gary Snyder, is a large volume that covers forty-six years of his writing, including some unpublished material. It contains poetry, essays, letters, journals from his travels, meditations, and notes that reflect the development over the years of his philosophical and cultural ideas. There is also a chronology of Snyder's life.

Further Study

Davidson, Michael, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Davidson points out that even though the term San Francisco Renaissance is usually associated with the Beat movement, it was, in fact, a collage of different communities, often at odds with one another, whose agendas were social and political as much as aesthetic. These various communities provided important contexts for subsequent counterculture developments, such as gay liberation, feminism, and the New Left.

Friedman, Amy L., □Joanne Kyger, Beat Generation Poet: 'A Porcupine Traveling at the Speed of Light,'□ in *Reconstructing the Beats*, edited with an introduction by Jennie Skerl, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 73-88.

This is an overview of Kyger's career that emphasizes the difficulties she has encountered as a woman poet in a competitive male environment and the lasting influence on her work of Beat poetics and relationships with Beat poets.

Notley, Alice, □Joanne Kyger's Poetry,□ in *Arshile: A Magazine of the Arts*, No. 5, 1996, pp. 95-110.

Notley discusses a wide range of Kyger's poetry and some of the influences on her work. Drawing on her experience of having heard Kyger read her poetry aloud on several occasions, Notley argues that Kyger is a poet of the voice rather than the printed word. Notley also has praise for Kyger's commitment to truth.

Russo, Linda, □To Deal with Parts and Particulars: Joanne Kyger's Early Epic Poetics,□ in *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation*, edited by Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace, Rutgers University Press, 2002, pp. 178-204.

Russo discusses Kyger's work as a woman poet; in particular, she examines Kyger's first work, *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965), which was inspired in part by Homer's *Odyssey*. Russo argues that Kyger explores and challenges received notions of gender and poetic authority.

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Review of *As Ever: Selected Poems*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 249, No. 24, June 17, 2002, p. 57.

Smith, Dale, “Energy on the Page: Joanne Kyger in Conversation with Dale Smith,” in *Jacket*, No. 11, April 2000, available online at www.jacketmagazine.com/11/kyger-iv-dale-smith.html

Suzuki, D. T., *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki*, edited by William Barrett, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956, pp. 83-108.

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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