Seven Seeds Study Guide

Seven Seeds by Jill Bialosky

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Contents

Seven Seeds Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Plot Summary....5

Themes....10

Style....11

Historical Context....13

Critical Overview....14

Criticism....15

Critical Essay #1....16

Critical Essay #2....19

Topics for Further Study....23

What Do I Read Next?....24

Further Study....25

Bibliography....26

Copyright Information....27

Introduction

"Seven Seeds" is a key poem at a turning point of Jill Bialosky's second book of poetry, *Subterranean*, published in 2001. It represents a high point of carefully woven verse and powerful meditation on themes such as motherhood, grief, and desire, for a poet who is rapidly emerging as a new talent. Although Bialosky's poetry does not clearly fit into a particular movement, this poem and many others in *Subterranean* establish a thoughtful female voice concerned with themes that range from secretive and personal to provocative and innovative.

"Seven Seeds" is one of the most important poems in the poet's writing about death and desire because it so fully combines the major mythological reference of *Subterranean* with the personal exploration of the speaker. In fact, in order to fully understand the poem, the reader must identify its references to the ancient Greek myth of Persephone's abduction by Hades, god of the underworld. Particularly important is the section of the myth from which the title comes, when Persephone eats seven pomegranate seeds while captive in the underworld; because of this act, she can go to her mother Demeter, the earth-goddess, but must return to her place in the underworld as the wife of Hades for part of each year.

Combining this myth with personal experience and universal themes of death, birth, and desire, Bialosky provides a poem of great interest to a modern reader or student of poetry. "Seven Seeds" is an excellent example of the use of a "conceit," or an elaborate, extended metaphor, and an allusion to an important theme from ancient mythology. This conceit, employed to develop new and complex thoughts that are highlighted in this entry, is characteristic of a sophisticated and engaging poetic style.

Author Biography

Jill Bialosky was born in 1957 in Cleveland, Ohio. She put herself through Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, where she majored in English and took her first poetry workshop. Then she studied for her master of fine arts degree at Johns Hopkins University and moved back to Cleveland. While working as a waitress, Bialosky tried to write poetry in her spare time, but soon decided instead to enter the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, earning her masters of fine arts degree there.

Bialosky began her career as an editor, eventually becoming a poet and then a novelist. Her first book, a collection of poetry on themes such as childhood and motherhood called *The End of Desire*, was published in 1997. In 1998, she coedited a collection of stories and essays called *Wanting a Child*, which was partly inspired by the fact that two of her children died from premature birth. Returning to poetry, Bialosky authored a collection entitled *Subterranean* (2001), which includes "Seven Seeds" and other meditations on desire, grief, and motherhood.

Bialosky's poems have been published in journals such as *Paris Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Agni Review*, and *New Republic*. In 2002, she published her first novel, *House Under Snow*, which tells the story of three daughters and a mother coping with the father's death. The novel has been very favorably reviewed.

Bialosky has received many awards, including the Elliot Coleman Award in poetry, and was a finalist for the James Laughlin Prize from the Academy of American Poets.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

The first two lines of "Seven Seeds" establish a straightforward "simile," or a comparison using "like" or "as." Placed in a "walk-up" (which simply refers to an apartment which requires ascending one or more flights of stairs to reach), the speaker of the poem likens herself to a bird and her apartment to a nest. This comparison suggests that the speaker might be pregnant because female birds are confined to their nests in order to guard their eggs. Since birth and motherhood are among the most central themes in this collection of poetry as well as this particular poem, Bialosky is careful to introduce them in the opening lines.

Lines 3-10

Lines 3 to 7 employ the poetic technique called personification, by attributing human qualities to a non-human, in this case a cherry tree. Leaves have veins, but they do not have arteries. So, the image in these lines, that of the speaker describing sunlight pressing against a window and filtering through a cherry tree, invokes a theme of reversal. It may appear to the reader that the sun is coming inside the window, into the veins and arteries of the speaker, until the context is reversed and the light is suddenly placed outside. The reader may then wonder why the light cannot enter the room, why the traditionally strong honeysuckle flower is fading, and why the vines are "perishing," which is a strong and dark word with which to end the first stanza. One important resonance of this image is that, unlike the timeless and confined apartment, the natural garden experiences time and death.

The first four lines of the second stanza then make a rapid shift to flashes of imagery of a fetus. Fine downy hair, or fetal "lanugo," is present only in the ninth month of pregnancy, so this baby is about to be born. It is important that Bialosky's diction, or choice of words, surrounding this fetal hair includes "sprouted" immediately after she has given plants qualities of people. The poet is introducing the concept of mingling between birth and death, plants and people, and mothers and daughters.

Lines 11-15

Lines 11 to 15 describe another rapid shift as the speaker describes the passing of seasons. Bialosky reinforces that the speaker constantly sits in her apartment watching the sky; the poet describes a gradual increase of warmth until the last word of the second stanza, "bright." This is in stark contrast to the decay of the first stanza. It is therefore interesting that the style of the second stanza is much more abrupt, with many periods and stoppages, than the flowing first stanza. The enjambment, which is the term for a thought running over into the next line, in the first stanza is much smoother as well. All of this suggests that there is something unique in Bialosky's idea of birth and

entering the bright world, and that she is establishing a reversal of expectation that will become clearer later in the poem.

Lines 16-17

Lines 16 to 17 seem to be saying that the speaker sacrifices her safe, confined space for a peek at the bright world. It is unclear where she will peek and why Bialosky chooses the word "bargain." This is the first moment in the poem when it is necessary to understand the mythological context in order to make sense of what is happening in the narrative. The myth of Persephone is extremely important to the entire poem, and these lines allude to the point when Demeter bargains with Zeus and Hades for the release of her daughter. A summary of the myth is included below, in the historical and cultural context section. For the story in full, see Book Five of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. At this point in "Seven Seeds," it seems that the speaker sees herself as Demeter and imagines her unborn daughter as Persephone. But, these lines are confusing because the speaker simultaneously must be envisioning herself as Persephone peeking out of her confinement; otherwise Bialosky would use "her confinement" instead of "my confinement."

Lines 18-21

The next lines, 18 to 21, envision the speaker descending from her apartment. They extend the confusion over which mythological figure the speaker considers most like herself. In the myth, only Persephone actually descends into Hades and is offered the pomegranate seeds, and the fruit tempts only Persephone. The walk downstairs presumably leads outside, into the bright world, but since it is a descent and involves the pomegranate Persephone eats in the underworld, it is still unclear where the speaker and the baby are moving and which part each of them plays in the myth.

Lines 22-25

Lines 22 to 25 increase the confusion as they imagine a "she" figure brought to her mother's "meadow" and away from the underworld. At line 22, by combining the daughter "she" from line 9 with the Persephone "she" that tastes the fruit, Bialosky has reached the turning point of her poem. The mythological has merged with the personal. The "she" refers most explicitly to Persephone, but there are strong hints that it refers also to both the unborn daughter leaving her "underworld" of her mother's womb, as well as the speaker herself in this role as the female tempted by the pomegranate, since she empathizes so completely with this feeling that she acts it out by descending from the walk-up to the bright outdoors.

Also important at this turning point in line 22 is the contradictory imagery. The literal image seems to place the "mother's warm-bedded meadow" as the garden from stanza 1, outside of the confined womb of the "underworld." But there is a subtle suggestion that this may be reversed because "warm-bedded" seems to refer to the nest and the

womb itself, while the descent downstairs implies that the underworld is, paradoxically, the bright outdoors. This is a difficult place in the poem; it is hard to distinguish what is happening and which female is being born and tempted and endangered□but Bialosky seems to be deliberately engaging confusion while thinking about such themes as birth and desire. The poet is exploring an idea that is prevalent in many poems in *Subterranean*: the desirability of a place like the underworld for a figure like Persephone or an unborn child, and the desire of the mother to bring her daughter into a different kind of "warm-bedded" confined space.

Lines 26-27

In lines 26 and 27, the speaker continues to imagine what it would have been like for the Persephone figure to have been tempted by the pomegranate seeds. It is important to note, however, that the speaker is producing a unique version of the myth itself. Bialosky warns the reader to be suspicious at this point by placing "Without foreknowledge" as a forethought to "of her doom"; the visual organization of the poem is the opposite of its literal meaning, which is a form of irony because the poet means the opposite of what she says. Different versions of the myth imply that Persephone may have known that she could not eat food from the underworld if she wanted to leave it; and the speaker certainly seems to have foreknowledge of her own doom as she leaves her confinement.

Lines 28-32

Lines 28 to 32, still imagining the temptation of leaving the underworld, provide a visual and rhythmic echo to the meaning of the passage. As Persephone eats more and more seeds, the lines become longer and have more syllables until she has eaten all the seeds and her lips are stained. The fact that the seeds stain her lips "crimson" is a particularly evocative image. First of all, it connects in color to the cherry tree in stanza 1; red symbolizes a loss of innocence in line with the concept of falling into darkness. Additionally, it represents the blood (through "veins and arteries") of life, and by now the reader should realize that Bialosky is not necessarily interested in condemning this sort of desire; she has been overturning assumptions about what is considered desirable since the first stanzas.

Line 33

In line 33, a declaration of the bright light outside, Bialosky brings the question of desire into focus and begins to resolve the reader's confusion over what she is trying to communicate. The italicization of "was" sets the line apart with surprise and revelation. It also places the speaker's extended imagination of the Persephone figure's temptation in the past and prepares her for a current enlightenment. The speaker's own experience of temptation by the bright light of the garden, despite the decaying honeysuckle and vines, allows her to relate to her daughter. The speaker seems to be coming to

understand her daughter's desire to leave the womb in relation to Persephone's temptation by the crimson pomegranate of the underworld and in relation to the speaker's own desire to leave her confined apartment. This is a complex view of desire, one that is related to death and the underworld, connected to the womb, and tied to a blood-red loss of innocence as well as a bright light connected to a hazy idea of the outside garden or "warm-bedded meadow."

Lines 34-36

Lines 34 to 36 establish the final simile of the poem, comparing the bright light of the speaker's desire to apple seeds when an apple is sliced open. The image of light in line 34 "shut now in my brain" provides a natural progression from line meditation on complex and inverted forms of desire in line 33; it calls into question whether light, meaning, birth, and desire are internal or external□a thought that sheds further insight on the question Bialosky has been raising about the meaning of pregnancy. Then, in line 36, the bright light of desire is represented by seeds, which connote (or make the reader think of) birth and regeneration. And the fact that the apple has "flesh" in the same line links, again through the technique of personification, Bialosky's thoughts to the first stanza's cherry tree.

Lines 37-38

In lines 37 and 38, the reader ponders the significance of exposing this apple star of meaning and desire "to the elements." It seems paradoxical that the same light "shut now in my brain" is being compared to something "cut open and exposed to the elements," but it begins to make sense when the reader considers the progression of the poem towards the garden. Bialosky has already established that this garden is a place of decay and a location not frozen or confined by timelessness, unlike the womb or the underworld. The bright light that the speaker has attempted to enclose and shut in her brain is moving out, in the simile itself, to the elements, just as the child is ready to be born into the natural world.

Lines 39-40

Lines 39 and 40 presumably refer to the unborn child, although of course she could not literally have planted any seeds. But perhaps more confusingly, they allude to a "mother's grief" that has not been established in the poem itself. Bialosky meditates throughout *Subterranean* on child suicide, child death, and death from premature birth, but it is unnecessary to stick firmly with one of these sources from the evidence in this poem. In fact, from what has taken place so far in "Seven Seeds," this grief seems more likely to come from the mother's hesitancy to release her unborn daughter into the decaying garden of life (and death). It remains unexplained, however, and this mother's grief could also refer to the poet's themes of unconfined versus confined desire.

Lines 41-42

In the final two lines of the poem, the simile of the star of apple seeds and bright desire receives a final twist: the seeds have been planted in the garden to grow. This is interesting because it makes the poet's thematic thinking about desire even more complex, as it turns the external meaning gone from closed in the speaker's brain to "exposed to the elements" and back again into something internal and growing. Bialosky merges her thoughts about birth and desire just as she merged Persephone and her daughter into a single, tempted being, and she manages to communicate a variety of complex insights about how these two ideas are secretly related in various internal and external spaces.

Themes

Birth and Motherhood

"Seven Seeds" is a poem about a pregnant woman and the thoughts of both Persephone and the speaker's unborn daughter reside in the imagination of the mother herself. So one of the main themes of the poem is the consciousness of this mother□particularly how she reflects on the process of birth. In part she does so by imagining herself in the role of the child, desiring to come out of the womb but also finding a temptation to stay in this dark, confined, timeless place. Persephone's story provides a way for the mother to access her daughter's thoughts, as well as suggesting a variety of thoughts about how birth is connected with desire and temptation.

The bond between mother and daughter is something on which Bialosky is meditating very carefully, but she is also exploring themes suggested by the mythological reference to Persephone's temptation in the underworld. The poet is interested in the process of birth in the psyche of the mother, for example. When the speaker of "Seven Seeds" imagines Persephone's temptation in the lines "soon she would be brought / back to her mother's warm-bedded / meadow and released / from the underworld," Bialosky is making observations both about how a mother understands the birth process and how creation in general relates to death, temptation, and desire. The result is not a rigid argument, but a series of evocative observations, images, and unlikely associations, which displays Bialosky's unique perceptions about birth and what it is like to be a mother.

Desire

One of the themes Bialosky examines most thoroughly throughout *Subterranean* is the question of what constitutes desire□desire in love, as a mother, as an artist, and as a general or unspecified temptation. The speaker of the poem seems to desire the bright light outdoors, but she is also tempted by the interior, confined, indoor space. Similarly, Persephone (in the imagination of the speaker) desires to break from her confined underworld at the same time she desires the pomegranate seeds. Bialosky is exploring the duality of desire before she goes on to tie it to the "veins and arteries" of the cherry tree and the "crimson" lips of the mythical figure having succumbed to temptation. Desire is established as a complex idea, both dangerous and divine, related to grief and death but also to growth and creation.

Style

Mythological Allusion

Mythological allusion is a vital element of "Seven Seeds." Bialosky uses it so pervasively because it serves as a helpful metaphor for current ideas; it also allows her to add her thoughts to an ancient debate on universal themes. The Demeter-Persephone myth provides the poet with a common basis that readers can understand and allows her to allude to a series of images and thoughts outside the restricted and relatively small world of her current work. She is thereby able to develop something more than a simple impression, something that comments on the fundamental assumptions and values of Western society. Alluding to mythology also adds a sense of timelessness and erudition to the work, although some readers may not be familiar with the myth or its contemporary associations.

Personification

As noted in the poem summary above, Bialosky sometimes imbues non-human objects with human characteristics. The two main examples of this occur in lines 4-5, when leaves are given "arteries," and in lines 36-37, when an apple is given "flesh." This poetic technique, called personification, is very important to the successful development of poet's themes, particularly the idea of blending, combining, and weaving characters and events. Personification enhances Bialosky's ability to underscore the melding of the worlds of the speaker, her daughter, and Persephone, because it melds character to place and makes identity more fluid. For example, the first instance of personification allows the reader to imagine that the arteries of the speaker are extending into the garden, and the second instance binds the child in a physical way to her mother's brain, as well as the garden. Personification also serves as a connecting point for these key ideas, since a similar stylistic technique makes the reader think of its other instance, particularly in a case such as this where both examples are tied to the garden.

The other reason this device is particularly suitable for "Seven Seeds" is that a key character in the poem, Demeter, is an inherent example of personification. The earth goddess is, in a sense, the "garden" imbued with human characteristics. Bialosky uses this fact to bring the worlds of the poem much closer; because the reader sees the speaker's arteries move into the garden, he/she immediately fuses the speaker with ideas related to Demeter. The poet then goes on to combine natural and human imagery by placing them so close together and by using such phrases as "warm-bedded / meadow" that combine earth and garden with motherhood and home.

Visual Construction

The key stylistic devices in "Seven Seeds" are the extended comparisons that overlap and form layers in order to provide a complex and carefully structured visual poem. The

speaker begins by comparing herself to a bird "confined to her nest." Immediately after this transformation of a person to an animal is the personification, imbuing a cherry tree with arteries. Then the second stanza begins by giving plant qualities (with the word "sprouted") to an unborn child. These layers of comparison continue until the simile in the lines thirty-five to thirty-eight of a star of apple seeds being compared to a light in the speaker's brain.

All of these comparisons are carefully employed in order to highlight thematic considerations, and to create a visual sense of the ideas in the poem. There is so much overlap and layering because the speaker overlaps her identity with those of her unborn daughter and the mythical figure of Persephone. For example, when Persephone's lips are stained crimson, the poet is visually connecting them to the cherry tree and the apple and therefore, by simile, to the objects of desire connected to the garden. This is a complex relationship the poet purposefully creates in order to express her ideas about what is connected in theme; this technique allows Bialosky to make her most important observations. She melds characters and ideas to suit her meditations, which are themselves complex themes that blend together. Following the comparison and visual connection of words and ideas allows for a much fuller understanding of both the style and the meaning of the poem.

Historical Context

Sources provide varying reasons why the god of the underworld, Hades, seized Persephone from the meadow where she was playing, and raped her. Some say it was because he was struck in love at the order of the goddess Aphrodite, and some say he asked his brother Zeus beforehand if he could do so. In any case, the girl's mother Demeter, goddess of agriculture, became frantic and rendered the earth cold and barren of crops while searching for her lost daughter. Demeter came to the pool through which Hades had entered the underworld, but the naiad Cyane, who used to live there, had been melted into a pool after trying to stop Hades from carrying down his victim, and could not tell Demeter what had happened. On the tenth day, however, Demeter discovered that Hades had captured Persephone and brought her to the underworld in his chariot. The original Homeric hymn states that she heard this from Helios, the sun god, but Ovid's text mentions that she found out from Arethusa, a lover of the river god Alpheus.

When Demeter learned of Persephone's abduction, she immediately appealed to Zeus that Hades bring her daughter back to her, saying (in *Metamorphoses*) that her daughter did not deserve to have a robber for a husband. Zeus agrees that she can be released, but on one condition: the fates have forbidden anyone from eating food in the underworld before they are returned above, so Persephone must not have had anything to eat while with Hades. Demeter soon learns, however, that her daughter has already eaten seven pomegranate seeds—either because Hades forced them into her mouth or because she was tempted of her own will. Persephone must therefore become the wife of Hades. But Demeter is too upset and the earth is too barren; so, not wishing to see the balance between mother and daughter destroyed, Zeus decides to make a compromise. He decrees that Persephone may return to her mother for part of the year (either one-half or one-third, depending on the source); and this is why Demeter only allows crops to grow for part of the year.

Critical Overview

Bialosky's *Subterranean* has been generally quite favorably reviewed. Critics such as the well-known Harold Bloom are quoted on the back of the collection itself with superlatives about her voice and style. In *Library Journal*, Louis McKee praises Bialosky's "varied and original" aesthetic, and presents a list of the poet's ambitious thematic goals, including "Desire, virginity, fertility and motherhood, . . . the passions of her life before children, the seductions of suicide, and the comforts of art."

Not all commentary has been solely positive. A *Publishers Weekly* critic points out that Bialosky's tendency to focus on the ground of conventional wisdom is not very compelling: "The poems work this ground with manic insistence, and, despite the fervid effort, harvest insights that are curiously banal." It goes on to claim that the collection is of "topical interest," and predicts that it will gather a good deal of attention in part because of Bialosky's high regard as an editor at W. W. Norton. A more long-term critical response remains to be seen.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is a freelance writer with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell discusses Bialosky's unique use of the Demeter-Persephone myth in her poem.

The myth of Demeter and Persephone has been significant to American women's writing since the late nineteenth century. It provided a common groundwork for certain types of female artistic thinking during the industrial revolution, including the search for a feminine voice and identity within a male-dominated world. Josephine Donovan writes in her book *After the Fall: The Demeter-Persephone Myth in Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow* that the myth "allegorizes the transformation from a matricentric preindustrial culture—Demeter's realm— to a male-dominated capitalist-industrialist ethos, characterized by growing professionalism and bureaucracy: the realm of patriarchal captivity;" to the authors in the title, the ancient story was an appropriate metaphor for the female experience at this time of social upheaval. Donovan's book goes on to describe how authors such as these formed a tradition of interpreting the myth.

Bialosky, writing over a hundred years later, inevitably works out of this tradition as well. Her emphasis throughout *Subterranean* on the story of Demeter and her daughter is connected to this precedent for American female authors, and there are a variety of reasons why the myth is appropriate for Bialosky's poetic goals. One is the very personal element of her self-expression, in which the death of a child is a persistent theme; Bialosky lost two children to premature birth and has written about it in the collection of stories and essays she coedited, *Wanting a Child*. There is a sense in many of the poems in *Subterranean*, including "Seven Seeds," that she is thinking about the loss of a child, although in many cases she seems to be putting this death theme in the context of adolescent suicide as opposed to premature birth. In any case, in order to combine her personal interests with universalities related to birth, death, and desire, Bialosky consistently employs a unique and complexly layered version of the Persephone myth.

"Seven Seeds" comes at a particularly fragile moment in *Subterranean*, immediately after a prolonged exploration into the intimate connection between desire and death and a meditation on the creation and birth process. By the time the reader comes to "Seven Seeds," these themes have been assigned a complex and often ambiguous, yet carefully established, place within the Persephone "conceit" (or extended comparison). The first poems in the section rapidly shift from the mythological to the modern portrayal of a teenage girl figure, and Bialosky begins to establish a connection among chaos, pain, and creation; in "The Wrath of the Gods," the gods "decree that out of abundance / was pain, and from suffering / perhaps one day a child." "The Fate of Persephone" extends this idea and establishes the meaning of this myth in other contexts by stressing in the first section that "fruits / of the orchard, / flourished" only when Demeter "was full of her," which implies that Persephone is still within the womb and therefore that creation and fruition must be confined in order to be meaningful.

Bialosky is carefully setting up her ideas about birth and creation in passages such as these. A similar meditation continues in "The Circles, the Rings," as the speaker gets closer and closer to the beauty of artistic creation only by making increasingly perilous circles and rings in the ice. As before, this image of birth and creation is both very dangerous and very sexual: "so lost in the thrust and *glide*, *glide*, *glide*, the noxious, delirious, / blinding rhythm." This thinking becomes increasingly urgent until "Temptation," the poem immediately preceding "Seven Seeds," connects sexual imagery like "take possession" and "stab / so severe it sliced into the center / of my being" with creation, birth, and art.

These images and extended associations are extremely important to the meditation on captivity and confinement on the part of the speaker, her daughter, and Persephone, in "Seven Seeds." The poem dramatizes a journey out of confinement for both mother and daughter that is simultaneously a journey of artistic creation. This new and exciting birth, the bright light compared to a star of apple seeds and possibly the object of the mysterious "For one small peek" line beginning the third stanza, is such an important resonance of Bialosky's carefully chosen mythological metaphor because it perfectly suits her idea of the pomegranate seeds. Planted in the garden, these seven seeds comprise not just the simplistic submission to temptation in a more traditional version of the myth; they represent a complex and ambiguous host of ideas related simultaneously to birth, desire, death, and artistic creation.

Again, Bialosky has been developing the significance of her mythological allusion, with a unique emphasis, throughout the collection and particularly in section three. For example, Persephone herself (although this is not at all implicit in the traditional myth) is established in the second section of "The Fate of Persephone" to be "a girl too eager / for love"; this implies that she is either complicit in Hades's abduction or aroused by it in some way. The mythical daughter of Demeter, like the teenage girls in "The Fall" and "Adolescent Suicide," has some preconceived ideas about what she desires and what she will allow to stain "her lips crimson," as it is described in "Seven Seeds."

Indeed, Bialosky is establishing the womb and its double, the underworld, as the locations of desire and excitement. In "The Fall," it is "the eerie cavern of the backseat of a boy's car" where "Desire was indistinguishable from suffering"; this "eerie cavern" represents the underworld and will come back with further significance as the desire in "Seven Seeds" becomes indistinguishably connected to the suffering of the mother, the daughter, and the mythical figure of Persephone. "The Fall" goes on: "It was all this we ever wanted / offered up like a shiny pomegranate"; this more explicitly ties Bialosky's thoughts about the temptation of a young girl, or Persephone, to these pomegranate seeds. As with the previous examples illustrating Bialosky's process of assigning meaning to her idiosyncratic version of the myth, the poet continues to treat the seeds as "all this we ever wanted"□ an excess of desire signifying both creation and death□in "Seven Seeds." They retain this ambiguity and serve as Persephone's ticket to straddling the world of desire (the underworld of her violent husband) and the "warm-bedded / meadow" of her mother.

Having illustrated such connections by the end of section three, the poet is free to experiment with further layers and twists on her associations in "Seven Seeds." Bialosky has already brought up the tendency for overbearing power on the part of the mother-figure, or Demeter, in "The Fate of Persephone," where the word "rape" inverts the savior mother with the evil abductor Hades: "(not even her mother / who raped the earth / in grief)." In "Seven Seeds," this inversion and experimentation with role-playing in the mythological allusion goes even further; the mother enacts her daughter's journey out of the womb and places herself in the role of Persephone, and eventually the daughter takes the role of her mother and the Demeter figure by planting the pomegranate seeds in the garden. This experimentation deeply complicates the mythological metaphor and throws into question which figure is creating, which is being tempted, which is dying, and which is being born.

In this complex meditation, Bialosky is building on and even overturning some of the common elements of this mythological tradition that goes back to authors like Edith Wharton. Josephine Donovan goes on in her description of the use of this myth in nineteenth-century female writing: "Persephone represents the daughters who leave the sphere of the mothers and enter a period of patriarchal captivity, sealed by the eating of the pomegranate seed□which emblematizes the betrayal of the mothers." Bialosky makes some vital alterations to the traditional formula of the myth; daughters may enter a period of "patriarchal captivity," but by the end of "Seven Seeds" the daughter figure is planting the seeds of artistic creation herself. As the mother leaves the confined space of the protector and Demeter figure, envisioning herself as Persephone, the daughter is able (after some close calls with death, suicide, and temptation) to become "ignorant / of a mother's grief" and empowered in a way that the mother is not. Indeed, this final twist, during which the daughter takes seeds traditionally representing a fall into "patriarchal captivity" to be the seeds of her own creative powers, is such an interesting and meaningful way out of the world of the poem because it places the child into an active and creative position. Persephone has made her way out of the confined space of her mother's womb, (implicitly) out of her mother's confined poetic meditation, and out of the underworld of patriarchal captivity, into an entirely new creative space.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on "Seven Seeds," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Bialosky's use of imagery, symbolism, and allusion to underscore the impact of a woman's miscarriage.

Bialosky's "Seven Seeds" is a poem that encourages readers to dig deeper. When the poem begins, it is very cryptic. Even as it progresses and Bialosky gives sporadic clues about the poem's main theme, readers may not understand what the poet is telling them. It is only at the end, when the speaker reveals that she is reflecting on the death of her child the previous day that readers realize the speaker is talking about her recent miscarriage. Even if readers do not understand completely what Bialosky is describing as they read the poem, the vivid imagery keeps them hooked. It is this imagery, coupled with associated symbols and an effective allusion to a classical myth, which ultimately underscores the miscarriage theme and gives it maximum impact.

"Seven Seeds" is a poem about motherhood, a fact that is not readily apparent at the beginning of the poem. With her use of vivid imagery, Bialosky gives her readers steady clues throughout the poem. These images fall into one of four categories: fertility, motherhood and birth, life, and death. All these categories complement each other. Bialosky does not use these image systems in the order described above, which is the normal order of the life cycle. If Bialosky were to do this, the poem would be relatively straightforward, and readers who recognized the cycle might be able to guess that the poem is going to end with a death. Instead, Bialosky is very clever, weaving images from each category into the poem in various places and slowly building up to the revelation of her miscarriage.

The idea of fertility is highlighted from the very beginning with the poem's title: "Seven Seeds." Although the reader does not know what the seeds refer to at this point, seeds are a universal symbol for fertility and the beginning of growth. A symbol is a physical object, action, or gesture that also represents an abstract concept, without losing its original identity. Symbols appear in literature in one of two ways. They can be local symbols, meaning that their symbolism is derived only from within the context of a specific literary work. Symbols can also be universal, as the seeds are in this poem. The idea of seeds representing the beginning of growth is a traditional association that is widely recognized, regardless of context.

After the seed symbol in the title, Bialosky includes several other fertility images in the poem, most of which share the organic associations of the title. For example, in the first stanza, the speaker talks about "the cherry tree / in the little garden." A garden is typically thought of as a symbol of fertility because it is the site of creation and growth. This classical association dates back to the very beginning of humanity, even to the biblical account of the Garden of Eden and the creation of all life. Although the speaker seems to be casually observing the cherry tree, Bialosky is aware of these strong associations and is using them to underscore the depth of the woman's despair over her miscarriage. The speaker has been "confined to her nest" for several months during her

pregnancy. After her miscarriage, she looks out her window and prepares to go outside. What does she see outside the window? A vibrant cherry tree in a garden. Seeing this symbol of fertility adds insult to the woman's injury over not being able to witness the birth of her own offspring.

If the reader has any doubt that this poem is about the intended birth of the speaker's child, the second stanza clears that up. The imagery in this stanza is direct and gives the reader a picture of a fetus growing inside its mother's womb. Again, the words that Bialosky uses, such as "sprouted," tie into the very natural, organic associations that she set up with her seeds and garden symbolism.

Although this child has not been born yet and never will be, the speaker does include some images that underscore the idea of life. For example, in the first stanza, the speaker watches the sun through the windows and notes that it is filtered through the "veins and arteries / on the leaves of the cherry tree." The speaker is describing the leaf in a human-like fashion, which again underscores the fact that the leaves on the tree are living, while her child is not.

The references to the tree lead to the most potent imagery in the poem, the imagery of death. Throughout the poem, the speaker includes subtle references to death, starting with the first description of the garden. While the cherry tree is alive, the honeysuckle is "fading" and the vines are "slowly perishing." These images indicate the impending death of these plants and specifically their death as the result of the encroaching winter season. It is shortly after this discussion of dying plants that the speaker chooses to start talking about her fetus, which she describes in the present tense, as if the fetus is still alive. This is significant, as it indicates that, while the fetus is dead, the miscarriage is too fresh in the speaker's mind and she is having a hard time letting go.

Dark thoughts start to creep into the speaker's mind. In addition to the death imagery in the garden, the speaker also invokes other images of death, most of them associated with a very potent allusion to the mythological figure of Persephone, who is also sometimes referred to as Proserpina or Proserpine. Although the specific details of the myth vary depending upon the source, the basic story of Persephone concerns her abduction by Hades (also known as Pluto), the god of the underworld. Persephone is the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture. When Demeter learns of her daughter's abduction, she is so distraught that she does not attend to her agricultural duties, and crops die. Although Demeter appeals to Zeus, who tells Hades that he must release Persephone, Hades tricks Persephone into eating a pomegranate in the underworld. Like Eve's eating of the apple in the biblical account of the Garden of Eden, Persephone's act has dire consequences. In her case, she now must live with Hades in the underworld for part of the year and can then live with her mother for the rest of the year. Most attribute this myth to the classical need to describe the seasonal renewal of life in the agricultural cycle, where crops are planted and grown in one part of the year, while the fields lie barren during the remainder of the year.

In the poem, Bialosky uses this classical allusion to great effect. The speaker starts talking about Persephone in the third stanza. "I know what it must have been like, to see

the fruit held out," she says. Just as she is subtle in placing her image systems, Bialosky is also subtle in her allusions to Persephone. She never mentions the goddess by name. Instead, Bialosky uses oblique references to the Persephone myth to build on the poem's already established organic imagery. As a result, when the speaker talks about Persephone being returned to "her mother's warm-bedded / meadow and released / from the underworld," the reference has two meanings. Literally, the poet is describing Persephone's return from the underworld to the world that her mother controls. Yet, a "warm-bedded meadow," especially when it is referred to in a motherhood sense, is also a reference to a woman's womb, in this case, the womb of the speaker.

When the passage is viewed in this way, "the underworld" also takes on different connotations. In Greek and Roman mythology, the underworld is the land of the dead, where people go after they die. Bialosky flips this idea around. If a "warmbedded / meadow" is an expectant mother's womb, then the "underworld" becomes the place that precedes the development of a human fetus in that womb. In other words, the speaker is referring to her unborn baby's development and saying that her unborn baby probably expects that it will soon take on human form and travel to the land of the living. One can find support for this idea by examining the second stanza. The speaker goes to great lengths to describe the development of her unborn fetus, listing specific details such as "downy hair" and "fetal lungs." Her focus on these human features, which the unborn fetus will now never develop, underscores the fact that her baby was at some threshold between life (the womb) and pre-life (the underworld) when the speaker had her miscarriage.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker continues her allusion to Persephone, talking about the fact that Persephone did not have "foreknowledge / of her doom" when she ate the seeds of the pomegranate. Again, Bialosky is subtle and does not indicate that she is talking about a fruit, or that the fruit is a pomegranate. She expects that her readers will pick up on the allusion to Persephone eating the pomegranate. Because she does not name the fruit, Bialosky is able to create an even greater impact with her imagery. In the literal sense, she is describing Persephone eating the pomegranate, "the juice staining her lips crimson." Since a pomegranate is red inside, one could easily assume that Bialosky is referring only to the fruit's natural juice. Yet, just as the other references to Persephone have double meanings, so does this passage, a fact that can be determined from Bialosky's use of the word, "crimson." While crimson is another word for red, it is more commonly associated with blood. Since this poem is about a woman's miscarriage, the crimson juice of the fruit becomes a graphic reference to the speaker's own miscarriage.

The speaker continues this pattern later in the same stanza, when she discusses the "seeds inside the flesh / of an apple when it is cut / open and exposed to the elements." Again, she could just be talking about somebody slicing open an apple. But, within the context of this poem about miscarriage, the seeds indicate the speaker's unborn child. With the loss of her child, the speaker is in so much pain that she feels as if she has been cut open and her insides have been exposed. Although this is not literally true, one can see why the speaker chooses to use such words. Her unborn child was up until

recently inside her, and therefore a part of her. Now, this child is dead and outside the speaker's body, where it is exposed to the elements.

As she does in the beginning, Bialosky uses a gardening image at the end of her poem. She notes that her child "took those seeds / and planted them in the garden." Again, Bialosky is reversing the symbolism that people have come to expect. As noted above, gardens are generally associated with fertility and life. Bialosky's clever use of death imagery and symbolism throughout the poem, as well as the Persephone allusion, indicate to the reader that there is going to be no birth here. Although the speaker says the seeds of the unborn child are being planted, they are really being buried. The speaker blames this on the unborn child itself, who is "ignorant / of a mother's grief," just as Persephone was ignorant of Demeter's profound grief. The speaker's unborn child will remain forever in seed form, never growing, as a result of the speaker's miscarriage, which halted the fetus's growth and development. Just as the garden in the beginning of the poem is starting to die, so is the garden at the end of the poem a garden that is focused on death, not life. Like Persephone, the speaker's child must return to the pre-life underworld. Unlike Persephone, however, the speaker's child will never return to the land of the living. **Source:** Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "Seven Seeds," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Topics for Further Study

"Seven Seeds" uses a mythological allusion to reflect on modern emotions and themes. Research some poems by other authors engaging the same technique, such as W. H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" (1952) or Sylvia Plath's "The Disquieting Muses" (1957). Do these poets, or others you have chosen, use a similar approach to Bialosky when alluding to mythology? How do they differ?

Read *Subterranean*. How does "Seven Seeds" fit into the collection and upon what themes does it touch that are explored more fully in the work as a whole? What is its importance compared to other poems in the work? Choose some other poems and compare their style and content with "Seven Seeds."

Write a paper in which you discuss contemporary poetry. Find a volume that surveys a variety of modern poets, then do some reading and defend the ones you find most important, meaningful, or enjoyable. Does Bialosky fit into a particular movement?

Write a poem of your own that uses a mythological reference and then write a short piece defending your poetic decisions. What themes and emotions does your poem convey? Why did you choose that particular myth to convey them?

What Do I Read Next?

Subterranean (2001), the collection of poems from which "Seven Seeds" is drawn, should perhaps be read as a whole in order to fully appreciate any of its individual poems. The collection is a fluid and lyrical meditation on many of the themes discussed above.

Book 5 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1955), translated from the first-century Latin by Rolfe Humphries, provides one of the most compelling and readable versions of the Demeter-Persephone myth.

Bialosky's first book of poems, *The End of Desire* (1997), is a sophisticated and thoughtful work, like her second collection, and is perhaps more intensely biographical.

Edith Wharton's famous novel *The House of Mirth* (1905) employs the Demeter-Persephone myth to describe Lily Bart's downfall from high society.

Further Study

Downing, Christine, ed., *Long Journey Home: Revisioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for Our Time*, Shambhala Publications, 2001.

A collection of impressions about the Demeter-Persephone story, this work offers an interesting blend of fact and fiction about the ways in which the myth is important today.

Friebert, Stuart, David Walker, and David Young, eds., *A Field Guide to Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, Oberlin College Press, 2001.

The impressive range of poets contributing to this book provides it with a broad and thorough insight into the many elements of modern poetry.

Hardie, Phillip, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

This critical text provides important historical information and commentary about the Roman author, including his version of the Demeter-Persephone myth.

Homer, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays*, edited by Helene Foley, Princeton University Press, 1994.

This edition of the most ancient source of the Demeter-Persephone myth provides helpful background and analytical material for the main mythological reference in "Seven Seeds."

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Bialosky, Jill, *Subterranean*, Knopf, 2001.

Donovan, Josephine, *After the Fall: The Demeter-Persephone Myth in Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989, pp. 1-7.

McKee, Louis, Review of *Subterranean*, in *Library Journal*, December 2001, p. 130.

Review of *Subterranean*, in *Publishers Weekly*, December 17, 2001, p. 85.

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

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

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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.

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