Southbound on the Freeway Study Guide

Southbound on the Freeway by May Swenson

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Introduction

May Swenson is known as much for the content of her poems as she is for the form and sound of many of her writings. Her style is often compared to the styles of e. e. cummings, Elizabeth Bishop, and Marianne Moore. Swenson experimented with poetic language, using such devices as metaphor, alliteration, assonance, and dissonance. By using these devices, many of Swenson's poems are not only intriguing to listen to, but also to read, through her visual inventiveness. May Swenson's poetry is filled with imagery in how it is heard and how it is laid out on the page, with her flowing personal and imaginative observations. As a testimony to her wide range of interests, Swenson wrote books of poetry for children, *Poems to Solve*, and *More Poems to Solve*, along with a book of very personal, very erotic poetry, *Love Poems*. After reading "Southbound on the Freeway," a person will take a second look at what a passing car may truly represent.

Author Biography

Swenson was born May 28, 1919, in Logan, Utah. Following her graduation from Utah State University, she worked as a reporter in Salt Lake City. In 1949, Swenson moved to New York City, where she held various jobs before becoming an editor for New Directions Press in 1959. She resigned the position seven years later to devote her time to writing. In subsequent years, Swenson was featured as poet-in-residence at several colleges, including Purdue University, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Lothbridge University in Alberta, Canada, and the University of California at Riverside.

Best known for the complex wordplay of her poems, which often include riddles and unusual arrangements of type on the printed page, Swenson is generally praised for her technical abilities and explorations of the challenges and possibilities of language. She lectured and gave readings at more than fifty colleges and universities, as well as at the New York YM-YWHA Poetry Center and the San Francisco Poetry Center. In addition, Swenson conducted workshops at the University of Indiana Writers' Conference and at Breadloaf, Vermont, and participated in the Yaddo and Mac- Dowell colonies for writers. Swenson also received numerous awards and grants for her writing over the course of more than three decades, including Guggenheim, Rockefeller, and MacArthur fellowships, and a translation medal from the International Poetry Forum in 1972. In 1970, Swenson was elected to membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and in 1981, she was awarded the Bollingen Prize in Poetry from Yale University. She died December 4, 1989.

Poem Text

A tourist came in from Orbitville,
parked in the air, and said:

The creatures of this star
are made of metal and glass.

Through the transparent parts
you can see their guts.

Their feet are round and roll
on diagrams or long

measuring tapes, dark
with white lines.

They have four eyes.
The two in the back are red.

Sometimes you can see a five-eyed
one, with a red eye turning

on the top of his head.
He must be special□

the others respect him,
and go slow

when he passes, winding
among them from behind.

They all hiss as they glide,
like inches, down the marked

tapes. Those soft shapes,
shadowy inside

the hard bodies□are they
their guts or their brains?

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

This poem starts with the literary conceit, or premise, that an alien life form has come from another planet and observed life on earth. The poem is clear about not taking itself too seriously. First, the alien is referred to with the friendly word "tourist," softening any notion of it being a hostile invader and implying a guest/host relationship. The name "Orbitville" is light, somewhat humorous: it implies small-town America, where names like Kentville, Greenville and Roseville are common. The first half of the name is pointedly un-exotic, using a word that shows an almost childish grasp of the reaches of outer space. When this poem was published, in 1963, the United States and Soviet Union space programs had put humans into earth's orbit, and the word would have been in the news daily. The use of the name "Orbitville" sets a light, anti-intellectual, child-like tone. Similarly, the action of parking "in the air" implies that this poem is being told by someone with a weak imagination, who borrows from popular science fiction rather than establishing an internal reality within the poem. For young readers this speaker is friendly and non-challenging; more sophisticated readers are amused by the poem's sense of whimsy.

Line 3

Line 3 refers to the earth as a "star." A space traveller would, if it knew anything, know the difference between a star and a planet. In having the visitor describe it this way, the author accomplishes several things. The visitor's naivete is established, making the confusion it is to feel in the coming stanzas more plausible. Also, the word "star" reminds most readers of wonder, of mystery. The emotional associations a reader has with a word constitute the word's "connotation."

Line 4

In Line 4, the theme of technology is introduced. It is not clear at this point in the poem what the visitor is seeing, or if it is actually Earth that is being visited. From the description given here, the reader can only tell that the visitor mistakenly uses the word "creature," which indicates a life form, to talk about something that has been manufactured.

Lines 5-6

"Guts" is a surprisingly informal word for the visitor to use in describing the "creature's" internal organs, but Swenson's purpose becomes clear in the last line of the poem, where the common association of "guts" with "courage" is brought into play. In Line 6, the visitor states the obvious: anything seen within could be considered guts.

Lines 7-10

It is in this part of the poem that it first becomes clear that the visitor is talking about an automobile: only wheels are round and roll where feet would be, and the description previously given, added to the wheels, implies a car. The speaker uses two interesting descriptions for freeways. "Diagrams" implies precise drawings, and to some extent this is exactly what roads are to travellers, although they do not appear to be so from a surface- level perspective. The idea of "measuring tape" stems from the regularly-paced dashes that divide highways up the middle. In making this comparison, the visitor reverses the human concept of road travel: we think of the road as hardly significant, a detail, but if it were a measuring tape it would be the point of travelling.

Lines 11-12

Lights have often been associated with eyes, probably because the opaque clarity of an eyeball resembles an electric light's glass casing and shines like no other part of the body. The placement of two headlights on a car in relatively the same place as eyes are located on the front of the face makes the visitor's assumption in Line 11 reasonable enough. Seeing tail lights as eyes is a little more conspicuous: since we know nothing about the visitor, it would not be hard to believe that eyes in the back of the head are common to him. But it is not enough to say that this detail is here only because the author wanted to show that the visitor has a different set of assumptions than our own: if that were the only reason, she could have included countless examples, but she chose this particular one. The color red implies fire and passion, and red eyes therefore conjure an image of heated emotion. Paired with the head-lights, that navigate roads with the clarity of light, the creature of earth is shown to be a mix of reason and emotion.

Lines 13-16

The five-eyed creature is a police car, which, in the 1960s, would have had a single red globe on the roof with a bright light rotating when in the process of making an arrest. With a deadpan tone that again indicates naivete, the visitor refers to the frightening figure of authority as "special," a term more cheerful than most people would use. Three red lights to two clear ones on this car tip the balance toward flaring emotions and away from rationality.

Lines 17-20

Here the poem's central question of man's intelligence is implied most clearly. From above, the behavior of automobiles in the presence of police cars seems like primitive reverence, as if they are honoring the police car, possibly because of the mutation on its roof. From the ground, slowing in the presence of a police car is an intelligent thing to do, to avoid a traffic ticket. Contrasting these two perspectives gives a fresh look at what we consider intelligence.

The detail of the police car "winding among them from behind" implies, to a driver, a cat-andmouse contest of wits and strategy between the motorist and the police car. From a visitor's simplistic perspective, it would appear that wits are not involved, that all parties are participating in a primitive ritual.

Lines 21-22

The hiss in Line 21 implies a snake, a very low order of life, slithering along the ground: to a visitor who can float in the air, this would seem especially underdeveloped. Measuring "inches" (bringing back the measuring tape analogy from Line 9) is another way of implying the car's smallness, fragility, or insignificance.

Lines 23-26

Referring to humans as "soft shapes" points out the vulnerability of the flesh, but in Line 24 the word "shadowy" at least admits that there is a mystery to human beings that the visitor does not understand. The question at the end uses common metaphors to examine man's role in the age of automation: are we the intelligence that controls the machines, or are we just part of the system that makes them run? "Brains" implies intelligence; "guts" implies courage. As indicated by the example of slowing for police cars, this poem asks whether human caution is a question of courage or intelligence. The freeway is an ideal setting for making this dichotomy obvious, since cars and the road system eliminate most opportunity or need for intelligent reasoning, leaving the importance of humans only slightly higher than that of pistons and sprockets.

Themes

Technology Versus Human Intelligence

May Swenson's "Southbound on the Freeway" is a poem that is frivolous on the outside and serious on the inside. Its whimsical premise of a naïve alien from "Orbitville" parking his spacecraft in the air above an American freeway is deceptively simple. But the humorous aspect should not obscure the underlying theme of human intelligence and human control pitted against the machines mankind has created. This is not, of course, a new or unusual theme, but Swenson's treatment of it in this poem is a bit curious. Here, she scrutinizes humanity through the eyes of an inhuman being. This allows for a more objective□albeit, funny and skewed□look at one of the most poignant questions to arise from the age of technology: are humans still in control or are we just trying to hang on for the ride?

Ultimately, the poem leaves that question unanswered, but the lack of resolve only adds to the disturbing assertion put forth by it. To the tourist from outer space who has never before seen an Earthling, all those things racing by below must be the inhabitants of this world or the "creatures of this star." His mistake, of course, is recognized soon enough by the reader who knows that what he is actually describing are vehicles, not people. Cars and trucks, however, are the dominant objects in the alien's sight, so his confusion is not difficult to understand.

The fact that there are so many of these objects reinforces the notion that technology appears to be running amuck. Americans love their automobiles, and, to the unknowing tourist, they are their automobiles. In addition, Swenson cleverly blurs the distinction between man and machine even more by assigning roles and a hierarchy among the cars, much like that of human society. The police car, or other kind of emergency vehicle, "with a red eye turning / on the top of his head" is shown respect by the other cars who slow down or move aside to let him pass. This creature, the tourist assumes, is someone special.

The most significant address of the technology versus human intelligence theme in "Southbound on the Freeway" comes at the end of the poem when the purpose of actual human beings□"Those soft shapes, shadowy inside"□is questioned. Are they the guts or the brains of the "hard bodies" in which they ride? Before one hastily responds that of course they are the brains, perhaps a little pondering is in order. While it is true that cars and trucks and microwave ovens and computers would not exist without the creativity and know-how of the humans that brought them into existence, it is also true that many, if not most, humans have now become dependent on those inventions, among others.

Americans in particular equate driving with freedom, whether it is to travel across country on vacation or across town to go to work. Ask high school or college students today to complete all assignments without the use of a computer and the dropout rate

would soar. Swenson's poem was written before much of contemporary technology was as widespread as it is now, but the automobile□ perhaps the most sacred of twentieth-century inventions□ was already an object of adoration and necessity in 1960s America. One must wonder, then, just how much power has been relinquished from the inventor to the invented. For the tourist from Orbitville, it is a moot point. After all, he cannot distinguish between the two.

Perception and Reality

Swenson makes a clever point in "Southbound on the Freeway" regarding the blurry line between what is real and what is only individual perception. The speaker in the poem may be from another planet, but often human beings on Earth vary widely in their "take" on what they see or hear. While one may be quick to judge the tourist from Orbitville as naïve or even foolish, he is actually calling it as he sees it. Note how sure of himself he seems in describing the "creatures"' body parts: they are made "of metal and glass," the "feet are round," they have "four eyes," and they "all hiss as they glide." These are straightforward, matterof- fact details that any real human being would say have nothing to do with facts. But from the alien's perspective, they make perfect sense.

Swenson drives home the idea of miscued perception by having the speaker of the poem elaborate on what he thinks are the eyes of the strange inhabitants of this new world. He surmises that the red light on top of the emergency vehicle is a fifth eye and that the behavior of the regular four-eyed creatures indicates that the five-eyed one must be an authority figure, someone revered. He sees cars slow down or pull over for the police car or ambulance, but the visitor has no idea that they are simply obeying the law of the land and, hopefully, of human conscience. He has no reason to suspect that what he witnesses□and, therefore, what he believes□is anything other than what he has described.

The value in this theme, of course, is not to point out that aliens from outer space would be clueless in understanding what real life on Earth is like or what real Earthlings are made of. The obviousness of that would hardly be worth calling attention to. But its importance comes to light when the tourist's experience is transferred to that of ordinary human beings. Two people watching the same sunset or the same ballgame or the same crime being committed rarely describe what they have seen in the same way. Often, their reports are completely contradictory. Perception, then, appears to carry as much weight, if not more, than reality itself and even causes one to ponder what is real. Swenson's poem cannot answer that question, but it does a good job of tempting the reader to ask it.

Style

"Southbound on the Freeway" consists of thirteen stanzas of two lines each. It is written in free verse, meaning that there is no consistent rhyme scheme or rhythm pattern. The short stanzas give the poem a look of simplicity, suitable for children's poetry because it requires less attention span. After the first stanza, the poem becomes a monologue by the "tourist from Orbitville," giving the tourist's observations of life on earth's freeways. The poem frequently uses the technique of enjambment, placing significant words instead of punctuation at the ends of lines, to draw attention to those words. The monologue is structured in small, simple words, using familiar images and sometimes using slang.

Historical Context

"Southbound on the Freeway" was written during a time in America when the country was reaffirming its love affair with moving machines. From the automobile to spaceships, technology was taking mobility to new heights in the early 1960s. Two of the most significant developments in this era were space exploration with both manned and unmanned crafts and the construction of an interstate highway system linking cities and towns across America in a manner never seen before. While both developments provided tremendous new opportunities for millions of people, not everyone was supportive of the efforts.

NASA's space programs using manned spaceships and unmanned satellites got underway simultaneously in the late 1950s and early 1960s. With the launching of the *Echo 1* satellite in 1960 and the more sophisticated *Telstar 1* and *Relay 1* in 1962, scientists could bounce radio wave messages off the satellites and redirect them to desired locations, as well as pick up signals that were sent back to Earth. *Telstar 1* provided the first satellite television broadcasts in 1962. Antimissile satellites were also launched in the early 1960s, and the military used satellites with high-resolution cameras to fly over nations and take pictures of facilities that were of interest to the American government. Enemy countries, however, were not the only targets of space exploration, for there were brand new worlds to discover as well. In 1960 *Pioneer 5* was launched on a journey to the Sun; *Mariner 1* and *Mariner 2* left for Venus in 1962; and another pair of Mariners headed for Mars in 1964.

While some Americans grumbled about the expense of the unmanned satellite probes, many others questioned the cost, danger, and effectiveness of sending astronauts into space. The first man in space was actually a Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, who orbited Earth in 1961. But the Americans were not far behind, sending John Glenn into orbit to circle the planet three times in his 1962 mission. Glenn was part of the Mercury space program that saw other launches in the early 1960s, followed by the Gemini program in the mid-1960s, during which American astronauts made their first space walks.

In the latter part of the decade, the Apollo program became the biggest scientific project in history, culminating with the moon landing in 1969. But in spite of the marvels of sending human beings to other planets and of all the discoveries that came from it, many Americans did not find the risk and expense worth it. In the decades since the 1960s, that sentiment has not changed much, particularly in light of the *Challenger* disaster in 1986. But the same is *not* true when it comes to Americans and their cars.

As early as the 1920s, the number of automobiles on the road was increasing at such a fast rate that soon there were millions of cars for only several hundred miles of pavement. Lawmakers began to consider the best ways to fund construction of more paved roads, but the Depression of the 1930s followed by World War II put highway projects on the back burner for nearly two decades. After the war, America saw some of its most prosperous times to date, and much of it was due to new technology. Just as

the automobile had replaced the horse and carriage, television replaced radio and for many travelers, airlines became the transportation of choice over buses and trains.

By the 1950s many states had developed their own road construction projects to keep up with the increased traffic, but it was obvious that a major undertaking was needed to meet the demands of a highly mobile public. Those demands were met with the passing of the National Defense and Interstate Highway Act of 1956, authorized by President Eisenhower and providing for the construction of over forty thousand miles of four-lane highways all across the country. It was a public-works project rivaled only by the construction of the Great Wall in China.

The significance of an interstate highway system for the military was fueled by Cold War anxieties over possible nuclear or other attacks on American soil. Highways would provide faster movement of troops and military vehicles, more efficient evacuation of citizens, and makeshift landing strips for warplanes facing emergency situations. But these sobering reasons for building thousands of miles of roadways were outweighed by the more frivolous self-interests of a car-crazy public. Americans love freedom, and the ability to hop in a car and end up at a beach or a mountain resort in a matter of hours instead of days is all a part of being free. Faster travel time was important not only in planning vacations, but in creating one of the most significant cultural changes in the nation's history: the birth of the suburbs. Many urban residents were tired of overcrowded conditions and high crime rates, and the opportunity to move to more open rural spaces and still hold jobs in the cities was very appealing to them.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, new suburbanites bought up prefabricated homes in communities just outside town as quickly as contractors could build them. Driving to work on the highway became trendy, as well as self-satisfying. But while some historians claim that the interstate system provided new employment opportunities and helped to link rural areas and small towns to the rest of the country, others point out that the creation of the suburbs and the "commuter" worker led not only to the decay of inner cities but to the destruction of farmland and personal property as well. Some even say the massive web of highways simply made Americans more dependent on their vehicles. Most drivers would not deny that, nor would they consider it a problem.

Critical Overview

In the *New York Times Book Review*, Karl Shapiro wrote that "[Swenson's] concentration on the verbal equivalent of experience is so true, so often brilliant, that one watches her with hope and pleasure, praying for victory all the way." Dave Smith, in *Poetr* declared that "May Swenson transforms the ordinary little-scrutinized world to a teeming, flying first creation□she is a poet we want in this world for this world is in her as it is in few among us ever." The transformation Smith refers to becomes active in "Southbound on the Freeway," as Swenson lends her scrutinizing eye to what a car really represents.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill addresses Swenson's use of humor to make a very serious point about American culture in the age of technology.

The humor in May Swenson's "Southbound on the Freeway" is unmistakable, but so too should be the seriousness of the poem's central concern regarding modern humans' dependency on technology and machinery□the automobile in particular. Hardly anyone would deny that Americans love their cars, relying on them for pleasure trips and unmapped adventures, as well as for more practical purposes such as getting to work or traveling for business or important personal reasons. But there may be a darker side to this seemingly wholesome, progressive, even natural human appreciation of technological advancements. "Southbound on the Freeway" addresses the more dubious side without sacrificing the whimsy and fun of its premise. Perhaps the best way to examine this poem is to look at it with the same mixture of humor and seriousness that Swenson applied to the subject.

"Orbitville" is as hokey as it gets when naming a town in outer space, and Swenson was well aware of that. But it paved the way for such a silly scenario as a naïve alien parking his flying saucer in the air and reporting what he thinks is an account of earthling life, making mistakes all along the way. Some of his errors, though, are simply misconceptions. He has never seen a human being before, so it seems plausible that all those things moving around below are this society's inhabitants. But what is his excuse for calling a planet a star? Surely, a being who hails from a world so scientifically advanced that its people can go on trips throughout the universe must know the difference between the two. (And we can assume that the poet did as well, since she was an astronomy buff and enjoyed reading science material for pleasure.)

Perhaps, though, the key is in the first line of the poem. The alien is a "tourist." Nowhere does it say that he is an astronaut or a scientist of any kind. This adds to the poem's whimsy in that we can liken the speaker to the average-Joe tourist standing in his Bermuda shorts with a camera hung around his neck, gawking at some foreign site which he has never before seen. *He* may not be quite so bright either.

The visitor from Orbitville also makes a curious observation in regard to what he believes are the inhabitants' "transparent parts," obviously, the car windows. He readily assumes that "you can see their guts," but is he referring to the people inside the cars or simply the insides of the vehicles□ dashboards, steering wheels, and such? Later, when he describes "Those soft shapes / shadowy inside," it is clear that he is talking about the humans, but his confusion at that point is not evident in the earlier part of his report. It is not necessary to clear up this discrepancy in order to understand or enjoy the poem, but it does hint at the tourist's uncertainty about what he is seeing, making him seem not as self-assured as his matter-of-fact tone first implies. In turn, this doubtfulness is a clever bridge between the humor and the seriousness of the poem.

The levity of its surface content is suddenly darkened by the unavoidable question of just *who* or *what* is in control.

But Swenson does not bring that question up until the last line of "Southbound on the Freeway." First, she allows the reader to enjoy getting to know a little more about the alien visitor while he gets to know the people of Earth, or so he thinks. Here, the reader has the advantage of *watching him watch us*, which for most of the poem, is more revealing of the unwary tourist than of humans. Apparently, he is as clueless about roads as he is about the people who drive on them. In Orbitville, everyone must fly, for the alien mistakes the highways for "diagrams□or long / measuring tapes□dark / with white lines." This imagery reappears later in the poem when the tourist reports that the inhabitants "glide, / like inches, down the marked / tapes." But not only do the creatures "glide" down the road, they also "hiss" as they go. This word lends a second, more devious, meaning to the tape measure imagery□snakes. Perhaps this implication is a part of the bridge between fun and sobriety. After all, it does appear just before the question of control arises.

Poet, editor, and critic Dave Smith is a fan of Swenson's poetry, and he asserts in an article for *Poetry* magazine that "There are two central obsessions in her work: the search for a proper perspective and the celebration of life's embattled rage to continue. Her poems ask teleological questions, and answer them, insofar as answers are ever possible." "Southbound on the Freeway" certainly presents a lesson about proper perspective, demonstrating in a light-hearted, yet poignant, manner how warped people's (or other beings') beliefs can be, based on the knowledge they have of the scene set before them. But this is not the core message in the poem. To use Smith's term, the poet was more interested in asking a "teleological" question and letting that be the stimulus to get the reader thinking. "Teleology" is defined as the doctrine that final causes exist, particularly in nature, and that there is an ultimate design or purpose in nature. In this poem, the question is whether the purpose of mankind's intellectual ability and technological intelligence are ultimately designed to make us the masters of the machines we create or simply the guts of the things that have taken on a mind of their own. It is a good question and not one that Swenson necessarily answers.

If the tourist from Orbitville were to take a stab at answering his own question, how may he approach it? Consider what he has observed while parked in the air above the freeway: thousands of similarly shaped, hard-bodied beings move quickly in parallel lines□some going south, some going north, but all sticking to the track, or "long / measuring tapes," they have been placed on. The scene is similar to a human being standing over a rat maze, in which all the walls of the labyrinth have been configured into straight lines and the confused animals run to and fro, to and fro, without apparent purpose.

Given the alien's limited frame of reference, it would not be surprising for him to decide that "Those soft shapes" inside "the hard bodies" are their guts, not their brains. The movement he witnesses does not show evidence of any intellectual endeavor. Instead, it all appears monotonous and mindless. The only hint of conscious decision making that the tourist sees is the show of respect for the creature with the "red eye turning / on

the top of his head." This act, however, is minimal compared to the continuing line of beings moving back and forth in rote fashion. From this perspective, it appears that the ultimate purpose of humanity is to become a *part of* the designs we create.

But not all should be left as doom and gloom in Swenson's poem. A case can be made for a more positive teleological theory as well. Aliens aside, the human capacity for intelligence and technological know-how has proven its worth many times over throughout history, and, apparently, pre-history. The fear of American culture being taken over by machines from outer space or from our own factories is a more recent concern. The onslaught of the industrial age, followed by the technology age, has caused some human beings to feel out of control of their own lives, even their own destinies. But most people, especially those who grew up with televisions, airplanes, freeways, and, certainly now, computers, do not think twice about the products that they not only *use* everyday, but that they *depend* on. It is this dependency that has riled some people over the past several decades, but it is safe to assume that those same folks do not ride horses or walk everywhere they go and that they do own a TV and have perhaps even briefly surfed the Internet.

The truth is modern human beings do rely on the speed, efficiency, and comfort that has derived from technological advancement, and the automobile is one of the most cherished advances. Its increased use necessitated the construction of a major interstate highway system, and, even if it looks like a long, black measuring tape or a long, black snake, it is still a practical, intelligent solution to the problem of rapid growth. In spite of cynical naysayers and warnings of the coming Armageddon between man and machine, American drivers will not give up their vehicles for anything, including threats of pending disaster. Most would actually be amused at the question posed by Swenson's tourist from Orbitville, feeling quite confident that they *know* who is in charge as they make they way southbound, northbound, or in any other direction on the freeway.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Southbound on the Freeway," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Fabian is a former student of poetry. In this essay, Fabian discusses how the wonderful use of imagery, metaphor, and simile in this work creates a photograph in the mind's eye.

At first glance, Swenson's poem may seem a bit out of the ordinary to the unsuspecting reader. The reader may inquire as to who this mysterious tourist could be and wonder where this so-called Orbitville is located. Yet, he still continues reading, allowing a willing suspension of disbelief to carry him through the twenty-six lines of simple text. By the end of the first stanza, the reader realizes with a certain delight that the story is told from the viewpoint of a traveler from another planet. What is this mysterious creature observing from above? At first, the reader naturally assumes that the poet, May Swenson, is describing humans because she calls them the "creatures of this star."

As the description continues, the reader begins to comprehend that the visitor is mistaken. For as Swenson slowly begins to flesh out her description, the reader sees that she is describing something inherently more mechanical: these aforementioned creatures are actually automobiles! The genius behind this work is that Swenson never uses the word car, yet all readers are aware by the poem's end that she is describing cars as humans know them. To effectuate this objective, Swenson relies heavily on the poetic devices of imagery, simile, metaphor, and personification to describe the familiar scene of cars traveling southbound on a freeway.

The use of the literary device of imagery is unquestionably the most prominent in the poem and jumps out at the reader with deliberate intention. Imagery can best be described as a picture made out of words. It allows the poem to become a puzzle, or an object of interpretation rather than a literal description such that we would find in a novel. Imagery is the vehicle that makes poetry concrete as opposed to abstract. For Swenson, the world is comprised of images because everything is described rather than named. She paints a verbal picture for her readers so accurately that they can make no mistake as to what is being portrayed on a literal level. The literary understanding of imagery has changed over the generations. Imagery once signified all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem, whether by literal description, by allusion, or in the vehicles of simile and metaphor. As the face of poetry evolved, imagery became synonymous with figurative language, and one of the most essential components of the contemporary poem.

The paramount concept behind imagery is that imagery does not necessarily imply a visual reproduction of the object because some readers may experience visual images while others do not after some prompts. Further, even among those who conjure up images in their mind's eye, the details of each reader's image will probably vary greatly. As in this case, a poem may itself be a single image composed of a multiplicity of images. Each line completes another piece of the puzzle, so as to fill in an empty canvas with an increasingly complete picture.

For example, the words "creatures" and "star" in the second stanza demonstrate the use of obscure language to force the reader to stretch his imagination. Although there is little confusion that Swenson means "inhabitants" and "planet," her use of less appropriate words allows the reader to compensate with his own imagination. Her word choice also lends authenticity to the inherently unbelievable premise that aliens are authoring this poem. Certainly, an alien might call Earth a star rather than a planet and would not know to call Earth's inhabitants humans. Those are our words. Swenson comments that "through their transparent parts / . . . you can see their guts." These "transparent parts" may reference windows or sunroofs, and the "guts" perhaps the steering wheel, dashboard, or even the person driving. The notion of aliens perceiving cars as insects or lower life forms is both amusing and grotesque. Further, it gives readers an uncannily new view of the world they once took for granted.

The description of the scene from above is resoundingly beautiful in its simplicity. The four eyes, with the two in the back, are obvious references to head and tail lights. The reader has undoubtedly stood many times next to a car without noticing the eye-like qualities of its headlights. The next description in the poem is that of the five-eyed "creature" with one-turning eye. This is a creature that the others respect, by going slowly and allowing him to wind around them as he passes. Although the description of a bird's eye view of a police car is so obvious to the reader, the reader can readily see that the alien interpretation is equally feasible. Swenson even employs a sound imagery, in the phrase "they all hiss as they glide." One can nearly hear the sound of the cars whizzing past on the freeway. In this sense, this work employs more than visual sense, which is a pleasant surprise, as most poems are content to only conjure images.

The description of the hissing sound and the notion of the cars "respecting" one another are examples of personification. Personification occurs when the author or poet assigns human or animal traits to objects. An example would be to say that the morning "awoke and stretched its weary arms." Some literary critics also call this device the pathetic fallacy when applied to living but inanimate things like plants, under the theory that it is morbid and unnatural to assign life-like qualities to unnatural objects. Yet, in this poem, the use of personification adds to the authenticity of the premise that automobiles are "alive."

Swenson, a naturalist who revels in depicting ordinary objects with imagination, has assumed a third-person point of view in other works. By deconstructing an aspect of human life so familiar that humans take it for granted, Swenson demonstrates that even the most mundane of objects is a potential subject for a poem. Likewise, in many of her other poems, she utilizes the same gift of creative description to clue the reader in to the object of the work without revealing the specifics. In "Little Lion Face," for example, she describes a sunflower thusly: "Little lion face / I stopped to pick / among the mass of thick / succulent blooms, the twice / streaked flanges of your silk." Using the same metaphorical techniques she uses in "Southbound on the Freeway," Swenson writes an entire poem about the beauty of a sunflower without once using the word sunflower. One can see strains of the same breed of innocence in "Southbound on the Freeway" because Swenson assumes the same pseudo-childlike levels of observation.

This approach to poetry is philosophically comparable to the approach of abstract or cubist painters such as Picasso. In such paintings, the artist distorts a familiar shape so that the viewer must infuse some imagination into dissecting the meaning behind the art. Swenson gives the reader cryptic verbal clues as to the object portrayed but does not disclose it completely. In this sense, the poet has demonstrated an ability to see the world though geometry, through lines and shapes. In Swenson's world, to write a poem is to reach for a multitude of words in order to describe something rather than divulge the mystery outright. The most interesting aspect of this piece is that it represents a subject and a viewpoint that most poets would not think worthy of exploration with a pen and paper. Why, one may ask, would someone choose such an unusual subject matter and viewpoint for a poem? The skyward view of cars traveling on a freeway is not overtly fascinating, pithy, or romantic. Readers frequently assume that a poem is a vehicle for exposing a facet of an author's personality or background. Unquestionably, some poets view their chosen art form as a medium for sharing some of their hard-learned wisdom with the rest of the world.

At first glance, this poem does not seem to teach the reader anything about the world. Readers might walk away musing at Swenson's creativity, but they may not ask themselves why she chose this particular topic. However, after rereading the lines, the reader may get the sense that Swenson is poking fun at human society. By the poem's end, readers gain a refreshing new insight into the bizarreness of the modern world, where human creations are sophisticated enough to resemble life forms to an unsuspecting extraterrestrial. The fact that an automobile resembles a life form to an unsuspecting observer could be a compliment to the unparalleled technological industry of the contemporary world. However, on the other hand, the fact that an observer from Orbitville could reasonably mistake the hard chassis of a car for an intelligent life form is potentially pejorative for human society. Swenson seems to be saying, "What do humans value in society?" Are human inventions the most apparent and noticeable aspects of this culture? Is engineering reflective of the true brains of human society? One may get the sense that Swenson believes advanced technologies are destructive to the natural world.

In her aesthetic portrayal of unassuming objects, Swenson could even have been described as the fringe of the San Francisco Beat Movement of the 1950s. This movement, which evolved out of intellectual meetings between bohemian poets in San Francisco and New York, spawned such famous names as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. These unconventional writers were reacting to the post World War II fervor and the beginning strains of McCarthyism, and their writing reflected a subtle angst for American popular and contemporary culture. The three recurring themes of the Beat movement are candor in thought and language, spirituality, and environmentalism. Swenson, who was born into a Morman family in Logan, Utah, often wrote poems depicting nature as a recurring theme. This technique allows the reader to rediscover something ubiquitous in his environment all over again.

Furthermore, the fact that Swenson elected to describe the scene of cars traveling rapidly in open spaces may be indicative of her Western American upbringing. She left Utah after finishing her bachelor's at the University of Utah to move to New York City.

Although she worked mostly on the East Coast and never returned to Utah to live, much of her poetry reflects a love of the natural world, which was not likely gleaned from living in cosmopolitan areas. We can almost see her writing this poem while perched on a mountain overlook in Logan, Utah, furrowing her brow at the sight of cars whizzing by on the freeway below her. Once domiciled in New York, she became a poet who corresponded frequently with other influential female poets of the twentieth century, most notably Elizabeth Bishop. Although less known in popular culture than Bishop, Swenson is revered in many critical circles, especially among sensual women writers.

As James S. Terry notes in his annotation of *Nature: Poems Old and New*, "Swenson's gift is to observe and catalog accurately while stretching possible meanings to a higher imaginative level. She is therefore both abstract and concrete at once. A vision akin to William Blake's is mixed with a homely vernacular diction like Robert Frost's or perhaps Roethke's, so that even the darker subjects are luminous with Swenson's unusual or new perspectives." Further, critic Robert Hass, in selecting Swenson's Question as the Poet's Choice in his Washington Post column on September 13, 1998, called Swenson a "wonderful and not very wellknown poet . . . in the quirky tradition of Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop." Perhaps Swenson will someday posthumously receive the recognition she deserves.

Source: Lisa Fabian, Critical Essay on "Southbound on the Freeway," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

The *Music of Claudio Spies*, recorded by CRI in 1996, is a collection of musical compositions based on the words of poets through the ages, including Shakespeare, Dylan Thomas, May Swenson, and others. Specific titles are not mentioned, but three of the songs are based on Swenson's work.

Swenson's "Symmetrical Companion" is a part of a poems-set-to-music collection, composed by Roger Bourland. Recorded in 1993 by Yelton Rhodes Music, the collection also includes lyrics by James Merrill, Thom Gunn, Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, and other poets.

Topics for Further Study

What if the tourist from Orbitville had parked his spaceship in the air above a football stadium where a game was being played? How would he have described the "creatures of this star" then, and what provocative question may he have ended his report with? Write your answer as either an essay or a poem.

Make your case in answering the "guts or brains" question in Swenson's poem. Defend your answer with examples of actual human behavior and tell how and why you arrived at your decision.

Do some research on the "Roswell incident" and write an essay describing the events that took place in New Mexico in 1947 and the subsequent actions by the U.S. government and military. Why do people still flock to Roswell? Why would there have been a cover-up? What do you believe really happened?

Other than the automobile, what do you think is the greatest technological achievement in transportation? If you awoke tomorrow and all the cars had disappeared, how would your selected mode of transportation play a role in a society without automobiles? What would be the practical and impractical aspects?

Compare and Contrast

1960s: The first and probably most famous claim of alien abduction is reported by Barney and Betty Hill of New Hampshire. The Hills state that on a return trip from Canada in September, their car was followed by a low-flying space ship, and, upon stopping to get a better look at it, they both blacked out, losing two hours of memory. Later, under hypnosis, they tell stories of being taken aboard the space craft and examined by aliens before being set free two hours later.

Today: The U.S. Air Force publishes the "Roswell Report: Case Closed" in an attempt to put an end to rumors that the military tried to cover up a UFO crash in Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947. In the report, the Air Force claims that what witnesses actually saw were remnants of military testing, and Pentagon officials back that claim by saying the "alien bodies" found in the New Mexico desert were probably test dummies.

1960s: *Star Trek* begins airing on television, playing off NASA's intensified space exploration programs of the 1960s. The show becomes an instant hit and is now a cult classic in American science fiction.

Today: Outer space TV shows and movies are still a major attraction for the American public. The treatment of aliens and humans has become more sophisticated since *Star Trek*, and distinctions between the two beings are not so clearcut as pointed ears, bulbous eyes, or bald heads used to portray them.

1960s: Activist Ralph Nader begins his consumer protection campaign by lambasting the auto industry for unsafe products. Nader's publication of *Unsafe at Any Speed* led not only to the halt in production of General Motors's "Corvair," but eventually to the creation of the Center for Auto Safety and the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Today: While safety features are some of the most touted selling-points of car manufacturers in the United States and abroad, unsafe products are still routinely revealed in the auto industry.

What Do I Read Next?

In 1996, editors R. R. Knudson and Suzzanne Bigelow published *May Swenson: A Poet's Life in Photos*. This wonderful book contains photographs of Swenson from her infancy to old age and includes many pictures of her at functions with family members and with fellow poets. It also includes close to thirty poems in a section at the end entitled "A Life in Poems." This is a must-see, must-read photo album for any Swenson student.

Ray Bradbury is one of the most respected authors in the genre of science fiction, and one of his most popular books is *The Martian Chronicles*, published in 1950. This collection of stories about colonies of human beings setting out to explore Mars in the then-distant year of 1999 is an important reflection on humanity's treatment of "the other" (in this case, the Martians) and on the tendency to conquer new lands without regard for the inhabitants who came first.

Tom Lewis's *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (1999) provides a vivid look at what it took to construct the highway system in the United States and what it has meant to the American public. Lewis contends that the open road used to mean freedom and a gateway to unknown places, and now it often means gridlock, smog, and road rage.

Elizabeth Bishop was one of America's most noted poets and both a contemporary and close friend of May Swenson. Like Swenson, she wrote highly imagistic poems and was a perfectionist with her own work, always concerned with painting accurate "pictures" with her words as opposed to abstracts. Published in 1983, *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979* provides a comprehensive overview of this important poet's body of work.

Further Study

Knudson, R. Rozanne, *The Wonderful Pen of May Swenson*, Macmillan, 1993.

This is a biography of May Swenson written by her longtime friend R. R. Knudson. It contains excerpts from her poems and photographs from her personal collection. Although written by an obvious supporter of her poetry, the book presents a candid, honest picture of the poet's life.

Swenson, May, *Dear Elizabeth: Five Poems and Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*, Utah State University Press, 2000.

Just as the title suggests, this collection of personal letters and poems dedicated to Swenson's friend, mentor, and fellow poet Elizabeth Bishop was published through the Literary Estate of May Swenson. It contains copies of actual letters in Swenson's own handwriting and exposes some of her deepest thoughts about a woman she cared deeply for.

□, *Iconographs*, Scribner, 1970.

Swenson used the word "iconograph" to refer to her "shape" poems□works that typographically and visually represent the subject of the poem. For example, a poem about an animal may reflect that animal's shape on the page. This 1970 collection highlights Swenson's appreciation for nature and science and gives the reader a good idea of how wide her scope was in terms of both subject matter and format.

□, *Made with Words*, edited by Gardner McFall, University of Michigan Press, 1998.

This is an extensive collection of Swenson's prose□ from excerpts of her fiction writing to essays about her thoughts on poets and poetry□as well as an interview. The book provides an excellent look at how Swenson created her work and what she believed about the entire creative process.

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□, *Nature: Poems Old and New*, annotated by Terry S. James, Houghton Mifflin, 1994.

□, *To Mix with Time: New and Selected Poems*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963.

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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