Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning Study Guide

Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning by Robin Behn

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Introduction

Robin Behn's "Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning" is a poem about life and love as well as about death. It incorporates images of a benevolent nature and also nature gone awry. It is about love that transcends physicality and flows into eternity. It is simple, and it is complex.

Through her use of extended metaphor, which in this poem centers on two moths, Behn tries to make sense of death while simultaneously trying to make sense of love and the loss of it. The poem is personal and from that most intimate point of view becomes universal, for who has not experienced, or at least pondered, the emotions that emanate from the incomprehensible concepts of love and death? As Behn delves into these two abstractions, she takes her readers with her, gently inviting them to look at both the wonder and the pain.

A copy of the poem can be found in Behn's second collection of poetry, *The Red Hour* (1993).

Author Biography

Robin Behn was born in 1958. She is a prize-winning poet and author of three collections of poetry. Behn is also a distinguished professor of English and creative writing and was honored with the Burnum Distinguished Faculty Award at the University of Alabama, where she began teaching since the 1980s. Behn has stated that she comes from a family of teachers. Her father also taught English and instilled in her a love of language.

Behn received her bachelor's degree from Oberlin College. She then continued her studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia and was granted a master's degree from the University of Iowa. She has been awarded several major grants, including the prestigious John Simon Guggenheim fellowship.

Her first collection of poetry, *Paper Bird*, was published in 1988 and won the Associated Writing Programs Award in poetry. Her poem "Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning," which appears in the collection *Red Hour*, was published in 1993. In 2001, her third collection of poetry, *Horizon Note*, was published and awarded the Brittingham Prize in poetry from the University of Wisconsin Press. Behn has also coedited a book that emphasizes her skills as a teacher, *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets who Teach* (1992).

Behn has won numerous honors for her writing, including a National Endowment for the Arts individual artist grant, an Alabama State Council on the Arts individual artist grant, and the Pushcart Prize for poetry. Her poems have been published in many literary magazines including *American Poetry Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and the *Iowa Review*. Her work has been anthologized in the *Pushcart Prize Anthology*, *Best American Poetry*, and *Poets of the New Century*.

Plot Summary

Lines 1□6

Behn's poem "Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning" is obviously about a suicide, but it is also about love. This is made evident in the first six lines of the poem. The speaker is feeling left behind. As she sits at her desk working, she thinks about her loss. There are two moths on the window in front of her, which, in the mind of the speaker, might symbolize the speaker and the person she has lost. The phrase "identical moths" might be a reference to the closeness the speaker and the person who passed away had. These moths are separated from the speaker, though. There is a glass between them and her. The glass could represent the invisible shield that a person feels when someone she loved has died. The memories and emotions tied to that person still linger, although the person's physical body is gone. Then, the speaker writes that the moths "open themselves to me." When something opens itself, it implies a new understanding may have been reached. Possibly the speaker, in watching the moths, comprehends something new about the way she feels. Or else, maybe she has come to an acceptance of her friend's death.

The speaker makes reference to a lamp that "illumines the decorative eyes." These eyes to which she is referring could be the markings on the moths' wings. But, they also could be symbolic eyes, such as the so-called inner eyes of revelation. The speaker could be referring to an insight she has received, while pondering her friend's death in the past decade. She says "So don't think I'm alone." The decorative eyes on the moths' wings were given to them, the speaker states, through "evolution." Like the moths, the speaker has also evolved, she implies, from someone who was lonesome to someone who is no longer alone.

Lines 7—12

In line seven, the speaker sends the reader back to the mention of a lamp in line 4, when she writes: "to them I am *the* light." She is the light, and the moths now become the "petals" of the flowers the speaker did not take to her friend's grave. In some ways, the speaker and the moths have once again traded places, as they do earlier when the speaker figuratively "sees" through the decorative eyes on the moths' wings. As the reader progresses to the last two lines in this section (lines 11 and 12), the moths are transferred to the image of the friend, when the speaker compares the "trapezoids," the shapes of the two opened wings on each moth as they spread themselves flat. The "trapezoids" cause memories to stir in the speaker, reminding her of the shape of her friend's shoulders.

Lines 13—16

The word *light* is presented again, this time as a candle (conjuring the image of the moth being drawn to the fire, and thus to its death), but also representing a small memorial ritual, such as when a person lights a candle in memory of someone who has died. If the speaker does not "light the light / for *x* nights in a row . . ." the poem continues, using *x* as an unknown number. However, the use of *x* in this case might signify that the speaker has forgotten how long she has lit the candle or perhaps suggesting that she will light the candle forever. Then in the next two lines, she again uses *x*, first to allude to whatever is unknown or unanswered and then to imply heaven or whatever exists after death. In these lines, the speaker intimates that once a person dies, all answers are forthcoming; all answers are known. Although all references to *x* on one level represent the same thing□the unknown□there are layers of meanings implied, which make the symbol *x* represent a different meaning in each use. For instance, on a surface level, the first *x* implies an amount, a number. The second *x* suggests the unknown. And the third, depending on a person's religious or spiritual beliefs, hints at a heaven or afterlife.

Lines 17—20

Line 17 abruptly brings the reader back from the abstract *x* to the concrete "thready legs" of the moths on the speaker's windowpane. The thready legs first appear to be characteristics of the moths: "Sometimes one travels several inches." This concrete image shifts in the next line when the speaker uses an abstract concept: "an old idea alighting / on a new ledge in the brain." Here, the speaker turns the moth into an insight, just as she has previously done with her insinuation that she sees through the moths' eyes. This time, though, the movement of the moths is compared to the movement of a thought, as if when a person is inspired with an idea, it is similar to a moth "alighting" on a "new ledge."

Lines 21—27

These lines are once again concrete images. They are also a bit morbid, as the speaker recalls vivid images of the last night she saw her friend. First, she remembers that after his death, she used to blame herself for the things she "had failed to do." In other words, she wonders if she had only done such and such, maybe he would not have taken his life. She wonders how she might have saved him. Now that ten years have passed, it is possible that she no longer worries about that. Those questions, although they may not have been answered, have faded away. In their place, she has only the image of his bloated body, stiffened by rigor mortis. The speaker uses this stiffened after-death state to play on words, making the body appear, in her mind at least, to "break." Then, she says that it broke because it desired "to be filled," suggesting that her friend could not find what he wanted in this world, so he died (or broke) in order to be filled. In the next line, she continues her thought, stating that his body broke "against the real river for good." The "real river" could be a suggestion of life or maybe the

afterlife. Either life broke him apart or else she is implying that he was reborn in the afterlife, broken away from physicality to allow his soul to escape and be free.

Lines 28—34

Her eyes, the speaker states, are "impervious to light." This could mean that she is blind or that the eyes through which she now "sees" her friend's death are not the eyes through which she sees the present moment. In other words, in this instance she might be talking about her inner eyes, the eyes of intuition or of memory. Looked at in another way, she could be saying that her eyes do not see the light she mentions earlier in the poem□the light of inspiration or revelation. But then, she says "This I have learned from the moths: / open your wings when you must / and flash the inner eyes." Again, this is a little ambiguous. Opening wings could suggest a flying away or a fleeing. However, to "flash the inner eyes" suggests the opposite. Instead of just looking with the physical eyes, the speaker seems to be saying that a person must look deeper, with the inner eyes. It is these inner eyes, the eyes "of a creature so big" it could devour not only the speaker but her thoughts, which are so powerful they themselves could completely consume her. In some ways, the speaker could be saying that a person must become something that he or she is not. Just as the moths can scare away predators by opening their wings and pretending, with their decorative eyes, to be much bigger than they really are, so too a person must close his or her outer eyes and look at the tragic loss of a friend through the eyes of his or her spiritual self, something much bigger than his or her ego. If the speaker does not do this, she contends, her loneliness and longing for her friend will eat her up.

Lines 35—38

The next four lines are a continuation of what the speaker learns from the moths. The lines "how there are more and more, / how they never fly away" could suggest, on a figurative level, that even when someone dies, life goes on for those left behind. But the next line, "Nor do they rest in pairs," is a little more troublesome. The reader wonders if the speaker is making reference to the fact that people cannot live as "pairs," or is she speaking from a deeper level and therefore expressing her thoughts that both in life and in death a person is really all alone. A person is born alone and must face death alone. The concept of pairs is an illusion, the speaker might be saying. Although paired physically, a couple is never paired on a spiritual level.

Lines 39—44

Here the speaker begins with the concept of a creator. She leaves the definition of a god to the reader. Her only mention of a greater being is through the word "whatever." The "whatever" created the moth and is now recreating her friend's body□spiritual body, in this case, as she mentions wings, an allusion to the concept of an angel. This "whatever" is in the "workshop where the thing is extracted / that leaves behind the

dark." She is thinking of her friend's death and wondering what it is that escapes from the body that takes the "light" of life, the spirit force, and leaves behind only the darkness of death. What is death, she seems to be asking. At the same time, she wants to know what that thing is that has been taken away. Then the final two lines of this work appear, the most abstract and vague lines in this poem. Questions arise here as to what the speaker is referring when she describes "their clustered shadows." Is she talking about the moths? Or does she mean death? Possibly, she is talking about what remains when the light has been "extracted" from a person's loved one when he dies. Or could she be referring to all of these concepts at once? The "out there" mentioned in the line "Out there their clustered shadows / spill darker kissmarks on that dark" could mean the space on the other side of her window, the night, or it could be the unknown, which infers death. The "darker kissmarks" could be the form of the moth with its body fluttering around the light, or they could be the memories of the love that the speaker once shared with her friend. The speaker could be saying that the dark of the night as well as the dark of the unknown are made darker still because she has been touched by death, by having been in love with someone who has passed into that darkness.

Themes

Death

Death is an obvious theme in Behn's poem "Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning." The title of this poem is the first mention of death, and from there, the reader is constantly reminded that the speaker of this poem has lost a loved one. The speaker is trying to come to grips with death, trying not only to console herself about her loss but to understand what death is. The passage of time may have changed her sense of loneliness and longing, but she still does not fully comprehend what death is. She has witnessed it, which has forced her to face her own mortality. She too will one day die, and she wants to know what awaits her on the other side. "Tell me what *x* is," the speaker asks. She also wants to know if she is responsible for her friend's death. Was there something that she did not do that made this person want to die? Could she have postponed this person's death? Is there something that she missed? She wants to know the answers to these questions not only to hypothetically bring her friend back but also so she will never do that same thing again and cause someone else's death.

Throughout most of the poem, death is an abstraction. The speaker talks around it, talks of the emotions that death has caused. But in the middle of the poem, death becomes concrete, as the speaker remembers the physicality of death: "Now I just see your body, / filled almost up with water, / harden in my arms." Physical death is real. She saw the distorted body of her friend and cannot forget the image. It is that concrete image of death that haunts her as her mind constantly returns to that scene. It is because she was there, because she saw the physical death that she knows her friend is gone forever. Having physically seen death makes the abstract concept of death concrete. Although she does not fully comprehend death, she knows that her friend is definitely gone. Her friend's death is not some nightmarish memory; it is real.

Love

This poem concentrates, on the surface, on the theme of death. Below the surface are many other themes. One of the major themes is that of love. Without ever using the word *love*, there is no doubt that the speaker of this poem loved the person who died. Her reference to "identical moths" in the beginning of the poem insinuates how close she felt to the person who has drowned. They were once together, but now she is alone, even though she tries to deny that by stating "so don't think I'm alone." Later the speaker writes, "Days I don't come with flowers," which implies that there are also days when she does bring flowers, even ten years after this person's death. The speaker also insinuates that she misses her friend tremendously, for she has often thought about how she might have done something differently and maybe her friend would still be there. There is also the reference to the speaker having given her friend a last embrace when the body was found. "Harden in my arms," the speaker writes as she remembers the last time she saw her friend. The embrace of a bloated and stiffened body could only

reflect a strong love. Further into the poem, the speaker mentions "the thought that would eat you," suggesting a psychological torment such as the death of a friend would cause. If this were only a casual relationship, there would not be a thought remaining that would be big enough to eat the speaker. She is suffering from the loss because of the depth of the love she feels. Finally, the speaker refers to "kissmarks," which may suggest the kisses she and this person may have shared. She remembers their kisses, which have marked her, making the darkness that she feels after her friend's passing that much darker.

Loneliness

Although the speaker of the poem denies she is alone, her denial actually accentuates her loneliness. Loneliness is on her mind; otherwise she would not have mentioned it. Also, relating to a chance encounter with two moths as keeping her company emphasizes that loneliness. The reader wonders if the moths are her only friends. The speaker makes no more direct comment about her loneliness. She only alludes to it. The reader must insinuate it from the images she presents. Those images include the fact that she still takes flowers to the grave, suggesting her strong memories of a relationship. There is also the mention of her friend's shoulders, a symbol of comfort. She makes no mention of any other pair of shoulders having taken her friend's place. Also, the fact that she recalls her friend's shoulders implies she has a need to be comforted, an allusion to loneliness. She continues to try to "fix" her friend's death, wondering what she could have done to prevent it. Her longing to bring her friend back suggests she is not moving forward, which also suggests a person who is lonesome. Whether she is surrounded by friends or not, her thoughts are not in the present moment. They are snagged on an event in the past, which fills a person with a sense of loneliness, a sense of something missing in life. The speaker also states, "they do not rest in pairs," a reference to an empty bed, perhaps. She now "rests" at night in a bed all alone. In the closing lines of the poem, the speaker refers to an ever-deepening darkness, something a person who feels alone could see or feel.

Spirituality

Behn makes several references to "the light" in this poem, which suggests spirituality or enlightenment. There is "the lamp" that "illumines," "*the* light," and "light the light," along with other images of light. This light not only illumines, it draws things to it, such as the moths. So the reader could easily read into these references a sense of the spiritual light, a light that helps the person understand, or a light that guides. In the phrase "light the light," the reader could infer a sense of practicing a spiritual ritual. The speaker also refers to a kind of generic godhead when she mentions the "whatever," a being or energy that she believes creates all things and then takes life away. The speaker also makes many statements about the inner eye, or a way of looking at life beyond the physical and the practical. She refers to going deeper inside herself to seek the spiritual explanation of life and death. "Flash the inner eyes," Behn writes, then she recalls what

she sees when she uses her inner eyes. It is through her spiritual beliefs that she is able to understand the metaphor of the moths.

There is also a place, which she cannot name and only refers to as *x*. It is in this place, she suggests, that questions that persist will one day be answered, an allusion to a final place of paradise or heaven. In another place in the poem, this place becomes the "workshop." It is through the speaker's allusions that the reader can infer her spiritual belief in a creator, a possible final explanation of what life is all about, and a final place of illumination where a person is granted a "remaking" of wings or a spiritual understanding.

Style

Imagery

Behn uses the imagery of moths throughout this poem. The moths, then in turn, acquire other images, such as the "inner eyes." It is through the moths that the speaker of the poem learns to accept her friend's death. She talks to her friend through the moths. And in some way, the moths also represent her friends□she is not alone because the moths alight on her window. There are also hidden aspects or symbols associated with the moths that are not explicitly mentioned but are subliminally expressed through an accepted cultural understanding. These include the metaphor of rebirth. A moth was once a caterpillar, so it becomes a symbol of life and death. Behn does not mention this in any part of her poem. But readers may associate the moths with life and death. There is the life of the speaker and the death of the friend. There is also the longing of the speaker for the friend to return or be reborn. The speaker also talks about an afterlife, which is another form of the life/death/life metamorphous that the caterpillar/moth enacts. In another way, the moth also suggests suicide, as moths may be drawn to their deaths when they see lit candles and fly toward the flame. Therefore, the moth and the suicidal friend are connected.

Light is also used as an image. Light may be death to the moth, but it is also illumination or a type of spiritual awakening. The speaker states that the light illumines the moths parallel to her own spiritual awakening, in which "an old idea" is placed "on a new ledge in the brain." In this sense, light is like the proverbial light bulb that turns on when a person is inspired. The speaker also mentions lighting the light, a practice of lighting candles for the dead. This is a memorial practice, with the candles lighting the way for the dead for the journey across the unknown. The candle also represents a reminder for those who remain alive. The candle's statement is that life is temporary. Eventually the candle is extinguished. In another place in the poem, the speaker says that she has become the light to the moths. Here she uses the light in a way that suggests friendship. The moths are drawn to her and keep her company, abating her loneliness. And finally, the speaker states that her inner eyes are impervious to the light. This time, light represents the outer world, the world of physicality. When she turns her eyes inward, to the darkness, she sees things that she cannot see in the light.

The river is used metaphorically as a crossing from life to death. The river called her friend just as the light called the moths. The river filled her love and smothered out life. Looked at in one way, the river (or nature in general) caused a tragedy. But the speaker goes further with this metaphor. Her friend desired "to be filled," and the river was what filled her friend. The river brought satisfaction. The friend was thirsty for knowledge of the other side and broke "against the real river for good." The "real river" represents the answers to the unknown or the promise of returning to a place of all-knowing. The river, in some myths, is a place of crossing from one world to another.

There is frequent mention of eyes in this poem. There are the decorated eyes on the wings of the moths, fake eyes that frighten away predators. There are the eyes that see memories and eyes that see the messages or the signs that are placed along the path of life, messages that help people better understand life.

Finally, there are the metaphors for death. These include the use of "*x*," which stands for the unknown. The aspect of darkness, or "darker kissmarks on that dark," suggests death. And the speaker also mentions the act of extraction, which implies the symbolic loss of spirit, or life.

Title

There are many interesting facets to the form of this poem. To begin with, the poet brings the title into the body of the poem by relating her first sentence directly to the title. The phrase "Since then" opens the poem, a phrase that would not make full sense without considering the title. This adds emphasis to the title, letting the reader know that it is not just the drowning that is the topic of this poem but also the time that has lapsed between the suicide of her friend and the time of the writing of the poem.

Couplet

The other obvious form is the use of the couplet, two lines placed on the page without space between them. These couplets are not rhymed and the phrases they contain are not always directly related to one another. For example, the couplet that reads, "To them I am *the* light. / Days I don't come with flowers," is not a complete thought. In order to finish the thought, the reader must continue to the next couplet. The couplet does, however, provide the opportunity to place a lot of space into this poem. Space is a form that is often used when a poet is expressing a particular emotion. The space offsets the words, intensifying them, reflecting how emotions intensify life. Also, since there is no rhyming scheme, the space provides a cadence, or a beat. If the cadence is not even within the couplets, there is still a regular beat presented, at least spatially, with the pattern of two lines then a space, two lines then a space.

Free Verse

The overall form is that of free verse, a poem that does not include rhyme or meter and in which the line is based on thought rather than on a syllabic beat. A free-verse poem reads a lot more like narrative than poetry. The thoughts and images of the poem influence the structure, which reads much like a person talking. Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" (1855) is often cited as a classic form of American free verse. Modern poets, who are aware of traditional form, nonetheless choose to break all the rules and create a form that fits the images that are to be portrayed.

Historical Context

Economics, Fashion, and Politics in the 1990s

The 1990s were a mixed bag of good news and bad, with many of the events of the 1990s mirroring those of the first four years in the twenty-first century. For instance, in the 1990s there was a president in the White House named Bush, who was forced to deal with the then-Iraqi-head-of-state Saddam Hussein. There was a Gulf War broadcast live on television. Trouble on Wall Street was also present in the 1990s and came in part through Mikel Milken, who pleaded guilty to securities fraud. And another Middle Eastern country, Iran, was also in the news in the form of the Iran-Contra affair, a political/military circumstance that left Oliver North facing charges for attempting to cover up details about the U.S. government selling guns to the Iranians in exchange for hostages, charges that were later overturned.

In fashion, mini-skirts were back again; and very high-priced sneakers were the fad. Arnold Schwarzenegger was in the news, not because of politics but due to his box-office hits□the *Terminator* movie series. Another familiar name in the early years of the twenty-first century was also well known in the 1990s□that of Rush Limbaugh, who gained a lot of attention with his bestseller, *The Way Things Ought to Be*.

The 1990s stood alone, however, with its share of surprises. On a note of victory, the Berlin Wall was torn down, thus reuniting East and West Berlin; the Cold War was ended; and Apartheid in South Africa was eliminated, allowing Nelson Mandela to be freed after spending over thirty years as a political prisoner. The U.S.S.R. disintegrated, leaving the United States the sole superpower in the world. And in technology, the growth of the Internet made emailing one's friends more popular than talking on the phone.

Poetry in the 1990s

Poetry in the 1990s experienced a change in direction. Free verse and autobiographical, or personal poetry, began a trend that gained enthusiasm as the 1900s progressed. Then poets such as Philip Dacey (*What's Empty Weighs the Most: 24 Sonnets*, 1997), David Jauss (*Black Maps*, 1996), and Dana Gioia (*The Gods of Winter*, 1991), who are referred to as neo-formalist, turned the clock back to a time when poetry was written according to established rules of rhyme and meter, with subjects that were less personal and more universal. Neo-formalists are sometimes referred to as extremists on the right as they attempt to bring back a reliance on tradition. Those who write free verse, in contrast, are called centrists. Free-versers, some say, are more American because they are always looking for new forms, breaking with tradition. While, neo-formalists, some critics believe, rely too much on old European styles.

On the left extreme are what are referred to as language poets. These include Rae Armantrout (*Necromance*, 1991), Steve Benson (*Roaring Spring*, 1998), and Lyn Hejinian (*My Life*, 2002). Language poets are known for the exploration of words for their meaning. Language poets are said, in general, to invite the reader into the production of a poem. These poets often leave the meaning ambiguous so that the reader is not a passive partner. Instead, the reader must work on the poem to discover his or her own meaning.

Multicultural literature, which began its surge in the 1960s, continued to expand in the 1990s. The first ethnic group to receive a lot of attention was African American poets. Then Latino and Native American poetry gained in popularity. By the 1990s, poetry from Americans with Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian backgrounds flourished, as did poetry translated into English from poets from all over the world.

Critical Overview

Behn's most highly praised poetry collection is *Horizon Note*, published in 2002. As Craig Arnold puts it in *Poetry*, "There's much to envy in this book□Robin Behn's third, and her best to date." *The Red Hour*, Behn's second collection, which includes "Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning," also received praise, but the writing in *The Red Hour* is considered by many critics less mature than that in *Horizon Note*, which is no surprise given that it was published ten years prior. Mary Ann Samyn in *Cross Currents* finds *The Red Hour* sometimes difficult to read (because of the subject matter, not for the writing). Behn's poetry, Samyn writes, "demand[s] much from . . . readers," but in spite of this the "rewards are plentiful." Samyn continues, "the reader willing to stay with the difficult emotional material will arrive at final destinations full of everyday graces." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer also notes that some of the material in *The Red Hour* is hard to face, including the suicide of Behn's friend in "Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning." This same critic enjoyed Behn's use of extended metaphors: "[Behn] proves herself highly adept in the use of simile and metaphor, giving already weighty subjects further depth." Although Fred Muratori in *Library Journal* thought Behn relied too much on metaphors, which "smothered" her "protagonists" with "zealous, awkward cleverness," he finds, overall, that Behn's poetry is "eager to separate itself from the flat musings of her contemporaries." Pat Monaghan, writing in *Booklist*, remarks on the spiritual aspect of Behn's poems. "Behn's spirituality is unorthodox," Monaghan noted and explained further that "Behn explores . . . the intersection between self and God."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hart has degrees in English and creative writing and is a freelance writer and author of several books. In this essay, Hart studies the subtle way Behn exposes her emotions in "Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning."

Behn's poem "Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning," given the poet's focused subject of suicide, could have been, at its worse, a melodramatic rendering. There is material in this poem, such as a vivid image of a corpse, which could have justified an overflow of sobbing phrases. But Behn did not allow that to happen. Maybe it was the ten-year lapse between the actual event and the writing of the poem that provided her the needed objectivity, the space and time to remove herself from personal saturation of her emotions. Nonetheless, the emotions are still evident, and possibly they are even more intense in her silence. The purpose of this essay is to look at the ways Behn exposes herself to her readers, the way she subtly hints at the deep love she feels for her departed friend and at what she has endured since her friend's death.

Right from the beginning, Behn causes the reader to pause with the wording of her poem's title. Behn does not use the word *suicide* nor does she use the word *death*. Instead, she has chosen to refer to her friend's passing as a "drowning." But it is not an ordinary drowning. It is a "deliberate" one. And from this point, Behn tells her readers that she is angry. If she had merely used either *suicide* or *death*, she would have implied that her friend was gone. And with the use of either of those words, her message would have been flat. But Behn raises the tension, because the word *deliberate* implies a lot more than a simple passing. Rather it suggests that there was premeditation involved, that her friend had decided to kill himself. And that is what has baffled the poet. Why would her friend do this? Why had she not seen the signs? What was her part in his drowning? The death of a friend from natural causes is heartbreaking enough. But to be left with these unanswered questions causes more tension. Behn wants the reader to know this right from the beginning. The word *deliberate* is explicit.

In the first line of the poem, there is another subtlety. The speaker states that since the drowning, she works at night. If the statement of her title had not preceded this line, little might have been made of it. After all, most readers would probably have considered that the speaker works a regular job during the day; therefore, the only time allotted to the poet's writing is at night. But there is another interpretation to ponder. If the first line is read along with the title, a fine twist might be implied. Holding the title in mind, one can infer that prior to her friend's drowning, the speaker did not write at night, that the suicide of her friend has caused this change. And from that point, one might question why this change occurred. The obvious would be to realize that while the friend was alive, the speaker of this poem and the friend kept company at night. There was no time to write at night. This would imply that the speaker is insinuating that she is now lonely at night. Taken a step further, it could also imply that she has trouble sleeping. She might even feel restless at night and is led to her writing as a way of trying to make sense of her emotions that are keeping her awake.

So in just the first two lines of her poem, Behn, with only a few words that normally would not allude to the extent of one's emotions, has exposed some of her innermost feelings. It is from this point that she begins her long metaphor through the symbol of moths. She states that on the glass in front of her, she has "decorative eyes" staring back at her, so she is not alone. Here, Behn employs understatement and tries to fool the reader into thinking this is an honest comment on her state of mind. It is as if someone had asked if she had food in the house, and she had looked up at her all-but-empty cupboard and seen a few crumbs of bread and therefore answered she would not go hungry. Of course, she is lonesome. If she is still trying to come to terms with the suicide of her friend ten years after it happened, she is still missing him. And his absence is causing more than loneliness.

In the next passage, the speaker claims that to the moths, she is "*the* light." Why would she say this? Could it be possible that she is mocking herself? She, who cannot see the light has become the light for these moths. They are drawn to her as if she were the beacon in the dark, a lighthouse. What a joke that must seem to her when she still feels so lost a long decade later.

Then the speaker begins to feel guilty, not for longing for her friend, clinging to his memory for so long. Rather, she feels bad about the days, in the past ten years, when she did not take flowers to her friend's grave. With these words, she implies that this has become a ritual. She does not say *months* or *years*. She says "days I don't come." If all she has missed is days during those ten years, why would she feel guilty? The only conclusion one can come to is that she still feels guilty about her friend's death. Again she implies her loneliness, because she frequents the cemetery as often as one would visit a close friend. No one has apparently replaced the camaraderie or maybe even the love that she still feels for this dead person. Even in death, her friend has not left her. Or at least, she has not yet left her friend.

The speaker says that when she does not bring flowers, her friend is to think of the "white petals / pressed into this pane." She is referring to the moths, whose flattened wings look like petals. But what else might she be thinking about? White can stand for death, such as the whiteness of one's skin after all the blood had drained from the surface. White is often used to imply the spirit or the ghost of someone who has died but white is also a color used in weddings. So is the speaker thinking of flowers at a funeral or the flowers she never received at a wedding ceremony? And in this same statement, Behn uses the word "pane" to refer to the window. Why did she not use the word *window* or *glass*? Could it be that Behn chose the word "pane" because it is a homophone (a word that sounds the same as another word with a different meaning) of the word *pain*? Readers might pass over this phrase quickly without realizing the relationship, but something subconsciously sinks in. There is real pain in this poem despite the fact that the poet tries very hard to disguise it.

Another good example of how expertly Behn camouflages her emotions is in the mention of her friend's "trapezoids"□her friend's shoulders. The common saying of having a shoulder to lean on is not lost on Behn. Of all the body parts she might have mentioned, her friend's hands or face or arms, she remembers the shoulders. These are

broad shoulders, she implies, strong enough to hide her from the outside world, something she has been missing since her friend's demise. But even here, with this statement, the speaker does not come straight out and declare her longing. Instead, she transfers her emotions to the moths: "They too remember your shoulders."

The only other time the speaker mentions her friend's body is when she describes it in death. What could have given her the strength and courage to wrap her arms around a bloated and stiff body? How could anyone ever forget the deep emotions conjured up by that contact with a dead and disfigured body□a body that had previously been as warm and sheltering. What but the deepest love could have inspired that? And if Behn is telling her readers that is exactly what she did, then she is also confessing the deep sorrow that remains inside of her. If that is not enough proof of the depth of her emotions, then her reference to "the thought that would eat you" cinches it. Her "creature so big" is not something outside her. But it is a predator. And this whole poem might be about her struggle to tame it or to avert it. Behn's monster is her emotions, which have been opened just as the moths' wings are open. And her struggle is not to close her emotions but rather to learn to live with them open without letting them consuming her.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, she discusses Behn's prolific use of light and dark to describe the conflicting emotions she experiences after the suicide of a loved one.

The stark title of Behn's poem is as deliberate as the intentional drowning of someone the speaker knew and cared about a decade before the work was written. Typical of Behn's style, the language is honest and uncomplicated throughout. Yet, it is also delicately woven with soft, provocative images that play against the harshness of the title. Her use of a light-versus-dark motif is made all the more powerful by the use of the moths through which she portrays it. These frail, elusive creatures that come out at night, drawn toward light bulbs and candle flame, provide a fitting and intriguing vehicle for expressing grief and complacence, sorrow and serenity. In short, they are the light and the dark of the speaker's mind as she struggles toward emotional balance.

"Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning" begins with an assertion for which no reason is given. The speaker addresses her deceased friend, saying that she has been working "at night" since the loved one's suicide. The work she refers to is likely composing poems, but it could be any nightshift position she holds. Regardless of which, she offers no explanation for what must be a considerable change in lifestyle if her work previously had been completed during daytime hours. These first words of the poem help define the difficult mindset of the speaker who has responded to her grief with a drastic decision. After announcing it in the first line, she goes immediately to an image of "identical moths" that "open themselves" to her. Perhaps the sudden shift is only a creative effort to diminish reality through metaphor, thereby easing the conflict of emotions.

Light in various forms permeates the poem, from the "lamp" that "illumines the decorative eyes" of the moths to "the light" lit for the dead to "an old idea alighting / on a new ledge in the brain." The speaker even suggests that the insects have bestowed an odd kind of divinity upon her, claiming that "To them I am *the* light." But she does not seem to consider herself a superior being to them. Instead, they provide companionship and comfort, keeping her from being lonely, as she assures her deceased friend. The relationship between the speaker and the moths is made even more complex when she compares their wings ("these white petals" and "Pale shapely trapezoids") to the shoulders of the dead friend. In doing so, she implies a desire to remember something good, something white and pretty to fend off the darker memories that are sure to follow.

Another quick shift in the speaker's thoughts occurs in the eighth and ninth stanzas when she says, "Tell me what *x* is." Whether *x* is a limitless number of "nights in a row" that she neglects to "light the light" for her dead friend or the eternity in which the loved one "must be . . . by now," the emotions stirred by either idea are too much to ponder. She suddenly returns to the moths, as before, describing one's movement across the windowpane as it "travels several inches / on its thready legs." The speaker again takes

mental refuge in a comforting metaphor, still concentrating on the insects as lovers of light and brightness. She knows they represent the opposite side as well, however, and her attention cannot be swayed from it for long.

The second half of the poem is given more to the dark side of the speaker's thoughts and, therefore, the darkness suggested by the presence of moths at the window. People do not tend to see or pay attention to moths except after nightfall when the airy creatures flutter about outdoor lights or make their way inside to dart around lamps or television screens. This inevitable association with darkness intrudes upon the speaker's thoughts as she pictures the dead friend's body "filled almost up with water / harden in [her] arms." She claims that "The eyes through which I see this / are impervious to light," meaning it is impossible for light to penetrate them. Although her mind cannot escape the horror of the scene, her eyes will not allow full light to shine upon it. In essence, she takes comfort and cover in the darkness that comes when she closes her eyes to sights too painful to recall.

After the grim depiction of her friend's corpse and her declaration that only impenetrable eyes can bear to see it, the speaker thinks again of the moths. Here, though, the decorative eyes, pretty white petals, and shapely trapezoids of her earlier thoughts are changed into "the inner eyes / of a creature so big it could eat / both you and the thought that would eat you." Suddenly the moths are monstrous. What she has "learned" from them is that there are times when a human too must "open [her] wings" and defy the horrible emotions that would overcome her if she weakens. She must "flash" the secret eyes that are normally hidden in a last effort to combat the dark realm of sadness, grief, and depression.

In the end, the darker emotions seem to prevail in the speaker's mind. The moths do not revert to their airy, light character but exist in images of compulsion and loneliness. Instead of abating, the dark thoughts multiply ("there are more and more"), and, like the insects, they are helplessly compelled to bang at the glass and "never fly away." They also never "rest in pairs," implying a solitary existence, whether forced or self-imposed. One of the most striking images is of "the workshop where the thing is extracted / that leaves behind the dark." The moths have been there, their light taken from them, leaving them only "clustered shadows" that "spill darker kissmarks on that dark." But the workshop is for people too. The same being that made the wings of the moths is now making wings for the speaker's loved one. This picture is both haunting and depressing. One must assume that the dead will not only be given wings but will also have the "thing . . . extracted" that leaves behind their own darkness.

It is difficult not to read Behn's poem as a despairing and melancholy work, and, given the inspiration for it, one is not likely surprised by its gloominess. If anything saves it from being completely woebegone, however, it is the intriguing mechanism through which the poet relays its message. Her inventive use of moths and their natural association with both light and darkness move the poem away from pure pathos and sentimentality and toward a more thoughtful form of expression. The reader is not necessarily expected to sympathize with the speaker but to intellectualize her response

to a friend's suicide. One is forced to ponder not just a grievous loss or a grim scene but the irony of despair and hope, surrender and determination.

Readers may also make a case for an ending that is not totally pessimistic. Even though the words "darker" and "dark" both appear in the final line of the poem, so does "kissmarks," a rather playful, light description of moths dancing about and touching the windowpane. It suggests a sweet, friendly relationship between the speaker and the creatures that come to visit her at night as she works. The first half of the poem, at least, supports this more pleasant scenario in which the moths are portrayed in a welcoming manner. But if the fluttering bugs actually represent a turmoil of emotions, one cannot be too sure of the friendship. After all, it is only the outer light of a burning lamp that draws them. Their inner light has apparently been extinguished.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Research suicide in the United States. Are the major causes known? What is the breakdown in age groups in the statistics? Read Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison's study *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide* and write a report on her findings.

Research the various forms of contemporary American poetry, such as feminist poetry, language poetry, and postmodern poetry. How do these forms differ? In which category do you believe Behn's poetry belongs. Use reference statements to back up your theory.

Write a poem using one specific image (e.g., Behn used moths). Tie this image to some powerful event that has occurred in your life. You can use any form of poetry you would like, but concentrate on using that image throughout your poem as Behn has done.

Write three letters to Behn's friend, conveying the same thoughts she conveyed in her poem. What is it that she is trying to say to him? What do you think she might have said to him in the first letter, written shortly after his death? In the second letter, written to him after one year has passed? How have her emotions changed? The third letter should be in the same timeframe as Behn's poem, ten years after his death.

What Do I Read Next?

Behn's first collection of poetry, *Paper Bird* (1988), contains many poems that delve into the spiritual. She demonstrates her skill with figurative language as she stretches her images to their full without losing control of them.

Horizon Note (2001) has been called Behn's best collection. She won the Brittingham Prize in poetry for this book. A consistent overtone in this collection is that of music, which Behn uses as a metaphor throughout.

Eyeshot (2003) is a collection of highly praised poems by Heather McHugh, a prize-winning Canadian writer who was educated at Harvard and who has taught at many U.S. colleges. Her work is often described as witty, sensual, and outright funny.

Beth Ann Fennelly's *Open House: Poems* (2002) won the Kenyon Review Prize in poetry and has been described as being witty and filled with unexpected insights. Fennelly states that she loves to write about those moments after which everything is changed. She also likes to write with a sense of humor.

Catie Rosemurgy's first collection of poetry, *My Favorite Apocalypse* (2001), has won not only prestigious awards but also the affection of her readers for her outspoken voice and for her daring. Her poetry has been described as being somewhere between Yeats and Mick Jagger.

Further Study

Barnstone, Aliki, *Book of Women Poets: From Antiquity to Now*, rev. ed., Schocken Books, 1992.

This is a highly praised collection of more than 300 poets from all over the world. The editor of this collection is also a poet, and her poetic inclination is evident in the collection.

Behn, Robin, and Chase Twichell, *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*, Harper Resource, 1992.

This is a collection of writing exercises from practicing poets and teachers to help aspiring poets. Several essays are also included to provide instruction and inspiration.

Jamison, Kay Redfield, *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide*, Vintage, 2000.

Dr. Jamison once planned her own suicide, then recovered from her depression, went on to receive a degree in psychiatry, and taught at Johns Hopkins University. In her book, Jamison provides personal, professional, and scientific information on the topic of suicide.

Wooldridge, Susan G., *Poemcrazy: Freeing Your Life with Words*, Three Rivers Press, 1997.

Anne Lamott (*Bird by Bird*, 1995) helped fiction writers loosen up so they could write better, and now Wooldridge has done the same for poets. Wooldridge has run many successful writers' workshops and has put the knowledge she has gained as a teacher and poet into this book.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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