A Thirst Against Study Guide

A Thirst Against by Linda Gregg

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Introduction

In her poem "A Thirst Against," Linda Gregg presents modern readers with an age-old philosophical dilemma: human beings strive to find order and logic in the world around them, but at the same time find life to be empty without the intuitive or emotional experiences that defy logic. To illustrate this logic-defying thirst, she draws examples from nature, and also includes an extended comparison to the characters in William Shakespeare's drama *Hamlet*. While Shakespeare's characters had trouble finding the right balance between intellect and emotion, Gregg's poem ends by stating a certainty that God exists in the most unlikely places, such as on a frozen, abandoned city street in the middle of winter. The dichotomy between logic and emotion is therefore appreciated as a good thing in this poem, and the thirst against logic is seen as being just as important as the hunger for it.

Gregg is considered an original, noteworthy modern American poet. "A Thirst Against" is characteristic of her work in its concern with ancient questions and its desire to relate them to familiar contemporary situations. The poem can be found in Gregg's 1999 collection *Things and Flesh*.

Author Biography

Linda Alouise Gregg was born September 9, 1942, in Suffern, New York, and grew up in Marin County, California. She attended San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University), graduating with her bachelor's degree in 1967. She taught at Pippa Passes College and Humboldt State College in 1967, and went on to earn her master of arts degree from San Francisco State in 1972. Her professional career began with teaching at such schools as Indian Valley College, University of Tucson, Napa State, and Louisiana State University. As her writing career has grown, with numerous poems and stories published in literary journals and more than seven books, she has continued to teach. She has held positions at the prestigious University of Iowa Writers Workshop and at University of California-Berkeley.

In 1981 Gregg published her first poetry collection, *Too Bright to See*. It was followed by *Eight Poems* in 1982, *Alma* in 1985, *The Sacraments of Desire* in 1991, *Chosen by the Lion* in 1994, and *Things and Flesh* in 1999. In 2001 two of her earlier volumes were reprinted as one in *The Sacraments of Desire & Alma: Poems*. Gregg has won numerous awards for her writing, including a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1983, a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1993, the Jerome J. Shestack Prize in 1999, the Sara Teasdale Memorial Prize in poetry in 2003, and several Pushcart prizes. Her poetry is widely praised and admired by other poets, and appears frequently in journals and magazines. Gregg lives in New York City and teaches at Princeton University.

Plot Summary

Lines 1—2

The opening lines of "A Thirst Against" establish the poem's central dilemma. It identifies the human desire for an orderly and intelligible world, characterizing that desire with a metaphor so familiar that readers might not even notice the poet is using figurative language. To say that people "hunger" for something is a reference to the basic need for food, as if the need for order were just as necessary to human existence.

The use of the word "hunger" allows Gregg to use hunger's parallel, thirst, to connect the two lines while introducing the concept of opposite desires. She does not identify whether the opposite of order here is chaos or nature (which would be the opposite of imposed order) or intuition, but instead she indicates it with the truncated phrase "a thirst against," leaving readers to stop and put together the pieces of her fragmented sentence before they understand her point. Using the word "thirst," Gregg shows that the thing that opposes order is every bit as significant as the drive toward it, but that it is a drive in the opposite direction.

Lines 3—4

In these lines the speaker asks readers to wonder about the relationship between reality and the mind. Things created in the imagination generally are free from rules of the physical world that cause decay over time. The poem gives the example of a flower here. Generally, a flower created by the imagination will not age or decay, because the mind is not limited by the laws of physics that rule common reality. What Gregg asks the reader to consider is what would happen if the laws of reality did affect things that exist in the mind. The poem implies that if logic, or order, had the same effect on a flower created in the imagination that it has on flowers in the real world, then it would "give it away to time." The flower that once was free from time's effects would have to age.

Lines 5—6

These lines emphasize the aging process referred to in line 4. Gregg uses the repetition of the words "by" and "leaf" to help readers *feel* the process of a flower in decay, rather than just reading about it. A common way of showing a process like decay would be to repeat each noun, as in "leaf by leaf, petal by petal." By abbreviating this structure to alternate the words "leaf" and "petal," the poem achieves two distinct objectives. First, it saves space, conveying the same idea with fewer words, leaving more room at the end of line 5 to begin the thought that will carry over to the next line. Also, this unusual way of phrasing the passing of time displays the poem's main point at the same time its words are telling readers about it. The ordinary construction of this phrase would be familiar and thus would conform with the reader's desire for order, but Gregg's point

here is to show that there are some things in the world that do not fulfill the human desire for order, yet are nonetheless worthwhile in and of themselves.

A blotter is a paper that writers used to use when inks were less absorbent. It was rubbed onto a paper with writing on it, to sop up the excess ink so that the ink would not smear. Just as the blotter would not have the original writing on it, but instead would show backwards copies of what was written, so too a world where the rules of natural order were followed within the mind would be one with faint and corrupt copies that do not necessarily make sense on their own. Gregg uses the term "soul" in line 5 to mean virtually the same thing to which she referred earlier with "mind": changing to this new terminology helps emphasize the spiritual nature of the inner life, drawing a wider distinction between it and the orderly ideas that usually dominate human thought.

Lines 7—9

In lines 7 and 8 the poem uses several words as unusual synonyms for "this world," which was referred to in line 6. The meaning of "the greater" is obvious; it is talking about the entire natural universe, and its greatness can hardly be understated. "The wetter" gives readers a subtle reminder of the sensory properties of the world, appealing to the sense of touch in order to evoke the experience of reality. It is also a reminder of the "thirst" used in the poem's second line as the opposite of the order that human minds impose on reality. When the poem calls the world "the more tired," it is referring to the infinite age and size of the universe, showing how the order that humanity imposes upon it is small and new by comparison. "The more torn" completes the impression that the world at large is much more tired and worn out than the ever-fresh world of the mind, since imagination is capable of always renewing itself. The last comparison in this sequence comes between lines 8 and 9. The world without order, the poem says, is all physical action that has no way of appreciating its beauty, like singing without a song.

The poem refers in line 9 to Hamlet, the main character of William Shakespeare's play of the same name. In the play, Hamlet is known for his dark brooding, believed to be caused by an excessive reliance on rational thought. When commanded by the ghost of his father to commit murder, Hamlet is unable to act, waiting for some more concrete evidence to lead him to the right behavior. The balance between his desire to act and his waiting for certainty causes him to act in ways that bring grief to all around him. Hamlet exemplifies the "hunger for order" that begins this poem, and his natural hesitancy shows the correlating "thirst against."

Lines 10—12

In line 10 the poem carries over the reference to *Hamlet* that began in the previous line. In the play, Ophelia is a young woman who loves Hamlet. Her father is the counselor to Hamlet's uncle, the king, and, noting Hamlet's strange behavior, he commands Ophelia to quit seeing him. Though she decides to reject her father and stay with Hamlet, Hamlet, too absorbed by the orders from his father's ghost, rejects her. Ophelia goes

mad, singing nonsense songs about imaginary flowers that no one else can see. Soon after, she is found drowned, presumably driven to suicide in her insanity. In a sense, her crushed sense of self-esteem and her ruined sense of order are what make Ophelia "less than the flowers she wore," because the flowers are not torn between idealistic love and harsh reality, as humans are. "A Thirst Against" draws readers' attention to the section of *Hamlet* that comes after Ophelia has committed suicide but before Hamlet himself has died, a time when Hamlet realizes that extreme emotionalism, such as what Ophelia suffered, can be just as deadly to a person as extreme rationality.

Lines 13—14

The poem again draws attention to the need for balance in life. Hamlet and Ophelia are used as examples of two extremes. He represents the hunger for order, in the way that he wishes to control his situation by failing to interact with it until he fully understands it. She, on the other hand, is so emotionally involved in the world that it hurts her too much to live in it. In this way, Ophelia represents the thirst for the thing that is the opposite of order. Gregg describes Hamlet as being too "heavy" and Ophelia as being too "frail," and points out that both extremes leave the people who hold them "among the fallen." The implication is that one must have a balance of the two in order to have a satisfying life. Both the hunger and the thirst must be obeyed.

Lines 15—16

In these lines Gregg uses the idea of God to describe the ideal balance. The central statement of these two lines is "it is here that God lives," offering readers a hopeful perspective. Surrounding that statement, however, are expressions of uncertainty. For instance, line 15 starts with "Each time I think," indicating that this idea has to come back to the poem's speaker over and over again. Similarly, the strong, direct statement that God lives here is weakened by the following statement that it is not in fact "here" but is "right around here."

Lines 17—18

The poem reveals that the place where God lives, or at least lives "around," is a terrible, ruined place. This is a far cry from the ordinary conception of heaven, which may be generally thought to be beautiful and full of promise. Gregg is saying that there is greatness in ruin, that, as the poem has asserted from the start, the lack of order is as important as order. The fact that the place is ruined leads readers toward the conclusion that it once may have been neat and orderly, which shows that God is present in destruction as much as in growth.

In line 18 a distinctly urban setting is identified. Gregg uses "streets" as a sign the poem takes place in an environment of human design, and "neon" as a sign of culture at its worst. Focus shifts in these lines from the inner life of the mind and the outer life of the natural world to the ways in which human thought has created the urban landscape.

Even though the setting seems full of despair, Gregg still makes a point of identifying it as a place where God resides.

Lines 19—20

As it draws toward the end, this poem becomes increasingly specific. Although "terrible ruin" has been mentioned in line 17, the poem focuses more on the sort of relatively ordinary misery caused by the bad weather of a mid-winter day with cold winds. In the last line, Gregg becomes even more specific, naming the particular city in which it takes place. The fact that it is Chicago is not as important as the fact that it is a big, anonymous city, where a person can feel the despair of being surrounded by signs of other people and yet still feel assaulted by nature. By giving the particular name of the city, however, the poem shows that the ideas it states about order and disorder are not purely abstract thoughts but are in fact relevant to the situation that readers experience every day in modern times.

Themes

Order and Disorder

This poem uses the opposing concepts of order and disorder to show the two sides of human nature. The orderly side appreciates logic and reason, while the disorderly side is driven by intuition. As Gregg puts it, humans require both, but in different ways, which she likens to the twin drives of hunger and thirst. Allowing the desire for order to take over would be counter-productive because only the mind can find and appreciate order, but the world does not exist in the mind. That is why it is described as "the greater, the wetter, the more tired, the more torn"—all concepts that the mind would fail to add to an idealized version of the world, but which nonetheless appear in the real, non-idealized version. The two characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to which the poem refers are both doomed by following extremes and failing to obey the urges toward order and disorder in the right proportions. Hamlet himself severs his human connections and tries to understand the world in logical terms, while Ophelia goes insane by following her emotions. "One too heavy, one too frail" is the way the poem sums up their deaths, "both lost."

The unbalanced relationship between order and disorder is summed up by the phrase "All singing, no song." A sense of order can tell a person how to sing, but not what to sing. To create a worthwhile song requires both logic and inspiration. Implied in the turn of phrase that Gregg uses is the idea that a song without a singer would be just as useless. The necessity for balance is also clear in the metaphors she uses in the very first lines to explain why humans need both order and disorder, as it would be dangerously foolish to obey one's hunger or one's thirst, but not both.

Urban Blight

The last six lines of "A Thirst Against" describe an urban situation, using it as an example of a place built by the human sense of order and destroyed by the natural tendency of things to fall into disorder, which is called "entropy." The city is referred to by name as Chicago, but the description that Gregg gives could apply to parts of any city across the globe. She says that it is "terrible" and "ruined" and observes that the neon signs that are meant to attract attention to stores and their products have instead created the opposite reaction, driving people away. While social scientists might dwell on the various reasons that would explain the decay of the city, this poem focuses on the effect of nature on these man-made avenues, bringing attention to the cold winds of winter. This makes the same point that is made throughout the poem: the forces of order that designed and built the city are not put into an even balance with the forces of disorder that make this particular geographical location a bad place for people to live.

Paradox

A paradox exists when two opposing concepts exist at the same time. "A Thirst Against" is an exploration of paradoxes on several different levels. The first and most obvious one is the one mentioned in the first two lines: humans have a natural desire for order, but coexisting with that desire is a conflicting desire that is against order. In some ways of looking at the world, these could not have equal appeal. To rationalize their contradictory existences, philosophers would have to interpret the facts to mean that one desire is sublimated by the other or that one is only an illusion. This poem, though, is not afraid to accept the fact that such a paradox can exist, even though the very nature of putting two contradictory ideas together at once means that there is no clear way of explaining how such a thing could happen.

In addition to the main paradox, the poem implies that other contradictory forces exist together as paradoxes. Flowers in the mind, for instance, are ideals that rely on real flowers but do not come near them, because of the effects that time takes on things of the world. Still, both real and ideal flowers are necessary to each other, with neither being more important than the other. The city streets are paradoxical because they combine the motions of nature with the designs of humanity. Cold winds drive down the avenues of Chicago, but according to the poem it is the bright neon signs that have driven people away, leaving the streets desolate.

It is with this last example that Gregg shows the true value of paradox, as a sign of God's existence. Although human reason cannot understand how contradictory ideas can exist at the same time, or because reason cannot understand such a thing, there must be a God who does. According to the poem, God "lives" at the place where paradox is most pronounced, because it is in the things that humanity cannot comprehend that God is most obvious.

Style

Allusion

"A Thirst Against" contains a literary allusion to William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. An allusion may be a reference to a character from another work, which an author uses to make a point come alive more clearly. In this poem, Gregg alludes to Hamlet and Ophelia as examples of two people with contradictory points of view who, in the end, are "both lost." Hamlet is too heavy, and Ophelia too frail. These characters enable the poet to show examples of her point about the hunger for order and the thirst against it, providing broad backgrounds that illustrate Gregg's ideas without having to include much about the characters in the poem itself.

Free Verse

Compared to structured poems, this poem seems to follow no particular rules. It does not have a consistent rhythm or a rhyme scheme, and it is not divided into separate stanzas. Poetry that has variable line length and no fixed metrical pattern is called "free verse." Gregg does, however, use several poetic elements to tie the parts of "A Thirst Against" together.

For one thing, the lines of the poem are all approximately the same length. They do not have the same number of syllables, as the lines in a traditional structure would have, but none of the lines is dramatically shorter or longer than the others. Each line has between six and ten syllables; those with seven or eight syllables account for over half of the poem. Though there is no pattern to variations, there is a consistency throughout the whole poem.

Another way Gregg gives this poem consistency is through the use of frequent repetition. Instead of using rhymes, which repeat the final sounds of words, she uses alliteration, or the repetition of consonant sounds. This is most obvious when the repeated sounds are at the beginning of words, such as the repeated "f" in "flower forms," but this poem also frequently repeats clusters of sounds, like the "s" in "streets made desolate." The poem also uses constant repetition in the structure of its sentences. Sometimes this takes the form of a parallel being drawn, as in "leaf by leaf, by petal" and "Hamlet darker than . . . Ophelia less than." A variation on this pattern of repeated sentence structures occurs when Gregg points out opposites in close proximity to each other, such as "one too heavy, the other too frail" and in the very first observation, "a hunger for order, and a thirst against."

The fact that there is no formal structure to this poem, but that it nonetheless is held together in subtle ways, is something that fits the poem's theme well. The hunger for order is satisfied by the use of consistent line length and repetition, while the thirst against order is satisfied by the poem's use of free verse.

Setting

This poem does not reveal until its last line that it is set in Chicago. It is a meditative poem, dealing with ideas rather than concrete reality for the first fourteen lines, until in the fifteenth line it mentions a particular place as "here." From that point, it becomes more specific, telling readers that the place is ruined and desolate before giving the city's particular name. This movement, from general to specific, enables the poem to accomplish two things at once. It describes a modern city that could be any city, so that readers all over the world can picture it in their minds, and it establishes a level of authenticity by showing that Gregg had a particular model in mind when she was writing "A Thirst Against."

Historical Context

It should not come as any surprise that a poem about the human tendency to match order with disorder should appear in 1999. By that time, the relatively stable and prosperous 1990s were already beginning to unravel. The decade began with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, ending the Cold War that for three generations of Americans had defined the issue of national defense. The biggest news story of 1991 was that U.S. President William Clinton was the first president in over a hundred years to be impeached by Congress. Clinton had been president throughout the 1990s, and investigations into his business and personal affairs had been ongoing since soon after his administration took office. In 1998 the House of Representatives voted to try Clinton for perjury after he lied to a grand jury about an affair he was having. Because of the intensive scrutiny, and the unapologetic political affiliations of special prosecutor Kenneth Starr, who was in charge of investigating charges against Clinton, there were at least as many Americans outraged at the politicians who were attempting to remove the president as there were people who were outraged at his dishonest behavior. In 1999 Clinton was acquitted, and his popularity rose to higher levels than ever.

The late 1990s also saw the longest economic growth period since the end of World War II. Stock prices in the late 1990s grew at a record-breaking pace, largely due to the advent of the Internet and the enthusiasm investors showed for buying into new and unproven companies. For instance, the Internet Stock Index, an index used by *Internet World* magazine to measure economic performance, rose by a surprising 91 percent in the first quarter of 1999. By comparison, the indexes that were used to measure stable, tried-and-true blue-chip stocks, such as the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the NASDAQ, rose 6.6 and 12.6 percent, respectively. The new technology fueled a race to prosperity, while at the same time there was widespread apprehension. All analysts expected the growth to stop sometime soon, as it in fact did in early 2000.

Critical Overview

Linda Gregg is a respected poet, though some writers approach her work with reservations. In a review of her early book *Alma*, for example, J. D. McClatchy of the *New York Times Book Review* notes, "Sometimes . . . [Gregg] has whittled poems down to a monotonous simplicity. And her range is narrow. But within these limitations, her poems shimmer in the cool, mysterious light her passion and intelligence cast on them." In *Library Journal*, Rosaly DeMaios Roffman's review of *Alma* reveals a consistency from Gregg's earlier work to her more recent "A Thirst Against." Roffman finds Gregg's poems focus on "harsh landscapes which Gregg explores until she can discover her connection to them."

In a review of Gregg's collection *The Sacraments of Desire* in *Poetry*, Steven Cramer is generally positive, praising the poems with adjectives such as "disarming," "exhilarating," and "stunning." After taking exception with the last section of the book and the way it deals with the residents of a poverty-stricken area of Mexico, Cramer ends his review by saying, "I don't want to leave the impression that the book as a whole disappoints. . . . The poems are exact about the conflicts inherent in human desires, yet resolutely committed to those moments when we 'let the spirit marry the heart.'" This strong praise, in a major poetry magazine, is indicative of Gregg's rise to preeminence as one of the leading voices in American poetry.

As her career has advanced, Gregg has become a poet whose name is likely to come up when discussions of contemporary American poetry occur. She has earned the respect of her peers. For example, when introducing one of her poems in his anthology *A Book of Luminous Things*, Czeslaw Milosz explains, "I consider Linda Gregg one of the best American poets, and I value the neatness of design in her poems, as well as the energy of each line."

Critical praise for Gregg's work has continued with her collection *Things and Flesh*, in which "A Thirst Against" is printed. In a review of this collection, a *Publishers Weekly* critic notes Gregg's enduring resilience. The critic praises the book overall, with the observation that "Gregg's fifth book of poems continues a project of formidable lyrical sincerity." William Logan in *New Criterion* writes of this collection, "[Gregg] has stripped life away to essentials, or life has stripped her to essentials; and the poems are a haunted meditation on what is left." Logan compares Gregg's poetry to that of Theodore Roethke and Louise Glück, noting Gregg's mysteriousness and intelligence.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at two colleges in Illinois. In this essay, Kelly examines the technique of parallel structure, which Gregg uses frequently in "A Thirst Against," and the poem's overall structure, which makes that technique too obvious.

Linda Gregg's poem "A Thirst Against" works by using several basic linguistic devices, most notably repetition and contrast. The poem states its major premise several times over, and then, to clarify some ideas, pairs them with their opposites, in order to show contrast. These techniques work well, but are limited: once a point has been made, it has been made, and making it over again just tries the patience of anyone reading the poem. Still, Gregg is a clever enough writer, with enough fresh details to bring to any topic to keep readers interested in her work, even when she is telling them something that they already know. The poem's repetitions would not do serious damage to it in general, but they are combined with a structural technique of taking the poem through three distinct styles without any differentiation or stanza break. That technique, too, would be just quirky if it occurred by itself. The repetitive pattern combined with the three-part structure, however, brings out the worst in "A Thirst Against," draining the energy from the poem before the reader can make it to the final line.

Repetition creates rhythm, and every poem has a rhythm, no matter how subtle. In more traditional, structured poetry, the rhythms are made by repeated patterns of stress (meter) and by repeated sounds (rhyme). In free verse like Gregg's poem, the rhythm is more distinct, particular to this one work. Therefore, it is entirely proper for the poet of free verse to consciously create patterns that will give the work cohesion without carrying all of the associations that come along with using the traditional forms. Gregg is very cunning in the way that she pairs concepts up with each other, stitching together what could otherwise seem a string of ideas. Examples of this are the list ("the greater" and "the wetter" start the list, and there is even symmetry in the last two examples, which both use "more": "the more tired" and "the more torn"); the variations on one word ("singing" and "song"); the repeated word (three of the last four lines start with "in"); the related concepts ("midwinter" and "freezing wind"); and the incomplete cycle (the common phrasing would be "leaf by leaf, petal by petal," providing readers with a pair of pairs, but Gregg merely implies this with "leaf by leaf, by petal"). Each time a concept is repeated, it is reinforced in the reader's mind, as is the sense that the poet is in control.

But simple repetition would become thin and obvious quickly. Gregg also uses a similar technique of pairing up concepts with their opposites: the same effect of cohesion is achieved, but without the redundancy. In addition, showing readers contrasts enables the poet to bring together the whole wide range of variety that comes in between the extreme. A good example of this is the title of the book from which "A Thirst Against" comes, *Things and Flesh*. This title implies all things in the universe, which can broadly be defined as dead or living, inanimate and animate, objects or subjects, real or ideal. The first sentence of the poem uses this kind of opposition. It pits hunger against thirst, and the meaning of these two can be expanded to symbolize all human needs and

drives. It also divides the universe between "order" (which can be taken to mean anything that is constant, or symmetrical, or even anything that the human mind can appreciate) and whatever is against order (which would include all that was not put into place under human control). Logicians use the word "tautology" to mean a statement that is all-encompassing, such as "It either will rain or it won't"; "order" and "the thing against order" functions as a tautology, because everything can be put into one category or the other. The word "tautology," interestingly, derives from the Greek word for "redundancy."

Parallels and tautologies are fine in poetry, since one of the poet's main responsibilities is to show, verbally, how things relate to one another. And Gregg uses them well in "A Thirst Against," as she does in most of her poetry. This is a poem in which any particular turn of phrase is admirable in its ability to extract meaning from the simple facts of life. The problem is that she has given the poem a form that betrays these rhetorical devices, so that they lose credibility with each line. It is conceivable that a lot of verbal relationships added together could reach a critical mass that keeps growing in significance in the reader's mind: this no doubt was the intent in this poem. What actually happens, though, is that the middle section of the poem cannot support all of the verbal baggage that is put into it. It collapses in on itself, taking the whole poem with it.

Without using stanza breaks, this poem is divided into three clear, distinct segments. The first introduces the theme that everything falls either into the category of order or the thing that opposes order, and that the mind yearns equally for both. For example, there are the flowers that are created by the mind, free of the order that regulates the physical universe, and the flowers that grow in the physical universe, regulated by time. There is the world, which is great and wet and tired and torn, and the blotter version that has absorbed certain aspects of the world, which the poem does not want the soul to be. There is the song, a tangible object, and singing, an intangible action. These concepts all feed each other, reinforcing the duality of the universe. They are followed by a second segment, from line 9 to line 14, which uses the story of *Hamlet* to build on the ideas already started. More will be said about this later.

The last section of the poem, lines 15 to 20, introduces the concept of God existing in the ruined, desolate, freezing streets of Chicago. The parallels are here, too, in "terrible, ruined" and "midwinter and freezing winds." Mostly, though, this section relies on the implied contrasts between decay caused by human forces (represented here by "neon") and those caused by natural forces (the freezing winds). Readers have the assurance that, no matter how irreconcilable these forces may seem, they are all in fact part of one system under the jurisdiction of God. Gregg does a marvelous job of showing her degree of doubt by tempering the claim "it is here that God lives" with the tentative "right around here." By offering God as a solution to the problem of conflicting interests, the third section seems to answer the problem posed in the first about humanity's interest in opposites.

This much, of itself, would be fine. The problem arises in the middle section. The comparison between Hamlet and Ophelia is appropriate to the poem's greater message,

with Hamlet, ever the tortured rationalist, and Ophelia, driven by her emotions, used to give human names to the hunger for order and thirst against it. Neither extreme position proves to be strong enough to save its proponents, so Hamlet and Ophelia die in the play. "A Thirst Against" succinctly tells readers this in line 11: "Both lost." Then it gives their fates again, but in the long version: "One dead, the other to follow soon." The point is made, and should be understood, but the poem comes around to explain their deaths again: "One too heavy, one too frail." By this point, anyone who does not see the irony of Hamlet and Ophelia having opposite world views and meeting similar fates has no business reading poetry, but the poem explains it one more time: "Both finding themselves among the fallen."

This needless repetition draws readers' attention to just how much repetition there is in this poem. As mentioned before, repetition is not necessarily a bad thing of itself, but readers who start the search for ways to say the same things with fewer words in this poem will be disappointed to find how little of Gregg's parallel structure is truly justified. Is it really necessary, for instance, to explain that a flower ravaged by time comes apart "leaf by leaf, by petal?" The wording has a nice ring to it, but adds no more to the idea that "something gives it away to time." And is it really necessary to describe Chicago as "terrible," "ruined," *and* "desolate," when one or at most two of these would do? Or to have the city abused by *both* "midwinter" *and* "freezing winds?"

Alone, none of these repetitions is poorly handled, and they each have something to add to the discussion, as long as the discussion is rising from the problem of order and disorder to the solution of God's grace bringing all contradictions. The overall problem is that this poem comes to a dead stop right in the center, trying too hard to make readers appreciate the pathos of Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship when, in fact, the fact that they both died is not that shocking (at least to readers of the poem; readers of the play will probably feel differently). The images in this poem are each powerful enough, but the overall message suffers irreparably when the poem's motion grinds to a halt in the middle.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "A Thirst Against," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

Blevins published a full-length collection of poems, The Brass Girl Brouhaha*, with Ausable Press in 2003. In this essay, Blevins argues that Gregg's poem relies on thought to the detriment of the production of feeling.*

Despite being the noisiest proponent of the deep-image school of American poetry (which insisted that the image, or visual symbol, was the poet's most important tool), Robert Bly argues in "The Image as a Form of Intelligence" (in *A Field Guide to Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*) that there are "powers, elements, or energy-sources *beyond the image* that make a poem forceful" (italics mine). These are "the sense of a speaking voice;" "something like psychic weight" (which Bly says "is connected to grief, turning your face to your own life, absorbing the failures your parents and your country have suffered"); "resonating interior sounds;" "sound as related to the drum beat;" and "the power of story."

Although it would be irrational to measure the success of a lyric poem against a longing for narrative, Gregg's choice of the plain style in "A Thirst Against" as well as her proclivity for a minimalist procedure that can only be called excessive lyric subtraction, does sometimes result in a simplicity that "leaves her vulnerable to [the two enemies of] sentimentality and smugness," as the critic David Orr, in a review of *Things and Flesh*, has pointed out. Gregg's penchant for abstract words, clichéd images, and obscure metaphors is also a weakness, especially in "A Thirst Against," which strives□but fails□to articulate an interesting metaphysical idea about the presence of God in a "terrible, ruined place / with streets made desolate by neon."

As Ira Sadoff says in "The Power of Reflection: The Reemergence of the Meditative Poem," many meditative poems begin with a "statement to be considered." Sadoff uses Robert Hass's famous "Meditation at Lagunitas" for a contemporary example, which famously begins: "All the new thinking is about loss." One of the potential risks of opening a poem with a completely discursive line is that the line itself may give away the poem's closure, or appear to know what the poem is going to think or feel before it thinks and feels anything at all. But Hass is a master poet: he knows he must counterbalance his statements with images and sound structures (as Bly would call music in poetry) in order to produce a poem of enough complexity to merit a reader's attention. In "Meditation," Hass complicates his opening meditative statement with a second meditative statement: "In this it resembles all the old thinking." In so doing, he makes an important point about the relevance of "new" ideas while complicating the poem's tone by offsetting the first line's flatness with a comic pitch. More importantly, in "Meditation," in a complex, winding syntax that Gregg achieves nowhere in *Things and Flesh*, Hass follows up his discursive lines with a whole series of images and sound structures.

Gregg's "A Thirst Against" also opens up with two lines of discursive meditation: "There is a hunger for order, / but a thirst against." Such a bold assertion gives the speaker authority: it imbues the poetic voice with power. But authority must be earned by the

poet's willingness to direct and shape the energy of the opening statement through the poem. Too many of the lines that follow Gregg's opening line are obscure or cliché: "What if / every time a flower forms in the mind, / something gives it away to time?" wants to reinforce the idea that order always gives away to chaos by way of entropy, but the question here, aside from chiming in a too-obvious end-line rhyme, is too theoretical, too abstract to be convincing. What flower, it might be wondered. Where?

Anticipating this question, Gregg moves to an almost-image. "Leaf by petal, by leaf" reinforces the idea of the "flower forming in the mind" and dying away, and the repetition of the 'l' sound in "leaf" twice and at the end of "petal" does elevate the poem's discursive (or speech-like) opening into song, but "leaf by petal, by leaf" is both too cliché to be surprising and too general to be persuasive. That is, it is neither interesting nor surprising to follow up a vague idea about a "flower [forming] in the mind" and being lost with an image of flower parts disintegrating because the flower that is supposed to be falling apart is not, in this case, allowed to rise to the level of an actual image in the first place. It remains an idea even in "leaf by petal, by leaf."

The poem's next sentence compares the soul to a "blotter" that covers up the truth of "the world," but how this truth relates to the idea that "there is a hunger for order, / but a thirst against" is difficult to say, since the syntax of "As if the soul / were a blotter of this world□of the greater, the wetter, the more tired, the more worn" mars the clarity of the metaphor. In other words, while it is possible to believe that "the soul" could blot out "the greater, the wetter, the more tired, the more worn," it is impossible to infer from the poem precisely how this blotting relates to the "hunger for order" and the "thirst against." Is the speaker's soul preventing her from recognizing "the wetter, the more tired, the more worn?" If so, why is the speaker so intent, at the end of the poem, on describing a Chicago that is apparently wet, tired, and worn? And in what way does this idea of the soul as a "blotter" relate to the idea of "singing" and "song?" That is, if "singing" is the order Gregg claims there is a general "hunger" for, is the "song" it does not produce the chaos there is a thirst against? Or is it the song the order and the singing the chaos? And is the order the speaker is addressing the natural order, or the order of mankind?

The poem's next five lines constitute the poem's most predominate example, or Gregg's last chance to make the idea that "there is a hunger for order, / but a thirst against" feel like more than an idea (for poems using discursive language must always do more than think). But these lines are the least convincing in "A Thirst Against," partly because they add the abstraction of a literary allusion (the reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) to the poem's initial abstract idea about order and chaos, and partly because they seem pretentious (if not smug). The allusion is also cliché. How can it be possible to say that anything in this world is "darker than night"? The reference to Ophelia's flowers recalls the flower imagery of the earlier lines, but since those images are not concrete (as, in contrast, Hass's reference to the "Muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish / called *pumpkinseed*" is), this reiteration fails to move the poem out of the realm of thought and into the realm of feeling.

The poem's last lines move from the literary reference to the speaker's thought process, which reminds us that she is attempting to find God in a "terrible, ruined place." As Ira

Sadoff points out in "The Power of Reflection" (borrowing from Louis Martz's *The Meditative Poem*): "the meditative poem approaches the love of God through memory, understanding, and will. Meditative poets in the seventieth century believed it the duty of the poet to create an awareness of divine omnipotence, or the relation of God to man." Because Gregg is playing with this tradition by placing God in "midwinter and freezing rains," these lines are interesting: they do clearly reveal that "A Thirst Against" wants to assert that God can be found□and is potentially more likely to be found□in a "terrible, ruined place / with streets made desolate by neon." The poem thereby wants to suggest that there is a divinity in even suffering and grief. But Gregg's penchant for abstract words mars even these lines. That is, though "streets made desolate by neon" and "midwinter and freezing rains" are better, as images, than the earlier image about the flower's leaf and petal, Gregg's reliance on adjectives in these lines detract from their ability to, again, move the poem out of the realm of meditative thought and into the realm of feeling.

Although Ira Sadoff is correct to celebrate the return of the meditative poem because, as he says, it "provides an opportunity to do battle with the mechanistic technique of what we've come to associate with . . . the poem of surfaces," a basic understanding of the fundamental techniques that "make a poem forceful" (to refer to Bly again) would have greatly served Gregg in the composition of "A Thirst Against." It is no small ambition for the contemporary poet to use the natural meditative or discursive elements of language to make ideas fashionable in poetry again. But ideas without feeling will only produce, as Gregg seems on some level to know, "all singing, / but no song."

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on "A Thirst Against," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Topics for Further Study

Read Shakespeare's tragic play *Hamlet* and choose the action of one scene that you think best shows a hunger for order and thirst against it. Write an essay explaining your position.

"A Thirst Against" makes a point of the freezing winters in Chicago. Find out what the average low temperatures are in Chicago and compare them to other cities around the globe. Then, find at least five other cities you think would have worked better in this poem and explain your reasoning.

Examine Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," in which he compares reality to the version of reality that people make up and carry in their heads. Compare what Plato has to say about the contrast between mental and physical phenomena to how Gregg presents the matter.

There have been many songs written about finding God in unlikely places. Set the last section of "A Thirst Against" to a song that exemplifies this experience.

What Do I Read Next?

Two of Gregg's poetry collections were reissued in one volume: *Too Bright to See & Alma* (2001) by Graywolf Press.

D. H. Fairchild's *The Art of the Lathe: Poems* (1998) was a runner-up for the National Book Award. Fairchild has been compared to Gregg in his meticulous language and perception. His poetry, particularly "Body and Soul" from the aforementioned collection, celebrates working life the way that "A Thirst Against" looks at urban life.

Pulitzer Prize—winning poet W. S. Merwin has expressed his deep admiration for Gregg's writing. In many ways, his subtle and nuanced work resembles hers. His collection *The Rain in the Trees: Poems* (1988) offers readers a good example of his style as it has evolved over his long career.

The late poet Joseph Brodsky, Nobel laureate and former poet laureate of the United States, has been compared to Gregg. His thoughts about issues similar to the ones addressed in this poem are in the title essay from his compilation *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (1997).

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, Riverhead Books, 2003.

Bloom, one of the leading literary critics in America, gives a book-length analysis of Shakespeare's play. Although Bloom's book focuses more on the psychoanalytical aspects of Hamlet than Gregg's poem does, it still helps give the poem's main argument more depth.

Kizer, Carolyn, "Linda Gregg," in *Proses: On Poems and Poets*, Copper Canyon Press, 1993.

While most poetry reviews tend toward flattering the poet, Kizer is willing to mix her praise with frank criticism in this essay. It begins, "Linda Gregg is a brilliant flawed poet," and goes on to explain Gregg's brilliance and her flaws.

Orr, David, Review of *Things and Flesh*, in *Poetry*, Vol. 176, No. 5, August 2000, p. 294.

Orr's analysis of the book from which "A Thirst Against" comes is generally positive, with reservations.

Purpura, Lia, Review of *Things and Flesh*, in *Antioch Review*, Vol. 58, No. 2, Spring 2000, p. 248.

The emphasis of this review is the pleasure a reader derives from carrying the book's theme from one poem to the next and watching them interconnect.

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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.

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

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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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