Three To's and an Oi Study Guide

Three To's and an Oi by Heather McHugh

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

□Three To's and an Oi□ is in Heather McHugh's 1999 poetry collection, *The Father of the Predicaments*. The title of the book comes from a line in □Not a Prayer,□ one of the other poems in the collection: □The father of the / predicaments, wrote Aristotle's translator, is being.□ In □Three To's and an Oi,□ McHugh focuses on death and language, referring to the story of Cassandra, the woman to whom the god Apollo grants the power to see the future but then curses with the burden of never having her accurate predictions believed. The play *Agamemnon*, by the Greek dramatist Aeschylus (525-456 b.c.e.), depicts Cassandra as knowing that she is about to be murdered and wailing □*ototototoi*.□ The title □Three To's and an Oi□ refers to words that do not seem to be in the poem, but they appear in this focal word, □*ototototoi*.□ The presence of the □to's□ and the □oi□ is obscured because the □oi□ is broken up, so that its *o* comes at the start of the poem and its *i* comes at the end. The poem questions why translators felt the need to render this cry □woe is me,□ when it is clearly just the sort of emotional outburst, or □baby talk,□ that people use when meaningful words are not adequate.

For years, McHugh has been one of America's most celebrated poets, with a list of major honors and awards that few poets could ever approach. In □Three To's and an Oi,□ as in most of her poetry, McHugh combines a rich sense of language and culture with a sly sense of humor, working a basic premise and its ramifications while more and more associations come to light. Using a delicate and deliberate style, McHugh takes the poem from dread to love, from infancy to maturity, from Aeschylus to the Bible, and from emotion to definition, all within a few short lines.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1948

Heather McHugh was born on August 20, 1948, in San Diego, California. She was raised in rural Virginia, where she was a shy child who began writing poetry at the age of five. She was also a natural scholar, breezing through high school and graduating early with academic honors. She entered Radcliffe College at age sixteen. While she was at Radcliffe, the *New Yorker* accepted one of her poems for publication. McHugh graduated from Radcliffe in 1970 and received her master of arts degree in English literature from the University of Denver two years later. Financial support from a MacDowell Colony fellowship and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts enabled McHugh to work on her first poetry collection, *Dangers*, which was published in 1977. Several collections of poetry followed. □Three To's and an Oi□ is from McHugh's 1999 collection, *The Father of the Predicaments*.

In 1976, McHugh took a position as associate professor of English at the State University of New York, Binghamton, where she stayed until 1982. At the time, she was in her early thirties and having her work published regularly in such showcases as the *New Yorker*, the *Nation*, the *Atlantic*, and the *Paris Review*. McHugh moved to Seattle, where she became professor of English at the University of Washington in 1983 and was teaching as of 2005. She also became a Milliman Distinguished Writer-in-Residence at the University of Washington.

McHugh became a chancellor of the American Academy of Poets and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Among her numerous awards were a Guggenheim Fellowship, grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and Yaddo artists' community, a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award, several Pushcart Prizes, and the PEN/Voelcker Award. McHugh was a finalist for the 1994 National Book Award for Poetry for *Hinge and Sign: Poems, 1968-1993*, which won the Boston Book Review Bingham Poetry Prize and the Daniel A. Pollack-Harvard Review Prize. McHugh's collection *Eyeshot* (2003) was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2004. In addition to her work as a poet, McHugh earned critical praise for her work as a translator, working sometimes with her husband, the scholar Nikolai Popov.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

□Three To's and an Oi□ starts by mentioning Cassandra, a figure from ancient Greek mythology. Cassandra is the daughter of Priam, the king of Troy. Apollo is in love with her and gives her the gift of foretelling the future. Cassandra rejects Apollo, however, and he condemns her to always having her prophesies misunderstood by the people to whom she tells them.

Lines 3-4

The poem refers to Cassandra's cry in *Agamemnon*. In the play, Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek army, returns to Atreus, his father, after the conquest of Troy, bringing Cassandra as his concubine, a battle prize. As soon as she steps into Agamemnon's palace, Cassandra knows that she will die there. Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, is already plotting to kill him. Cassandra cries out in fear, but the chorus interprets her fear as caused by not understanding the Greek language and her agony as grief for those she has lost in the war. Although it sometimes is translated □woe is me,□ Cassandra's cry also has been written □Aieeeeee!□ Because Aeschylus wrote in ancient Greek, translations are left to the discretion of the translator and often are inexact.

Lines 5-6

In lines 5 and 6, McHugh gets to the point of the poem□the duality of language. She points out that the meaning of Cassandra's expression is not as specific as □woe is me□; it is □less graspable than that.□ At the same time, though, her cry is not meaningless: □it isn't Greek for / nothing.□ That the sound Cassandra makes is not rich in meaning should not be thought to indicate that it is entirely meaningless.

Lines 7-8

The poem explains situations under which speaking with phonetic sounds rather than identifiable words might be expected. In times of □terror□ and □dreads,□ for instance, one cannot be expected to form ideas into rational thought. People revert to childhood at such times, which the poem generalizes as times when things go bad, and speak in baby talk, or the half-formed language that relies as much on sound as on meaning.

Lines 9-10

□Presences with promises□ are those that have no current meaning themselves but are important because of what they imply. McHugh uses the word □promises□ rather than □implications□ to indicate that the emotion hidden behind the sound is important and worth delving into. Mentioning a lullaby refers to the baby talk of the previous stanza. It reinforces the idea that the unstructured language of adults in crisis is the same as the language a baby tries to form out of emotion and sound. In this case, though, the language is not a startled exclamation but a soothing one, like a parent singing a lullaby to calm a baby while knowing full well that the child cannot understand the meanings of the words. With □shorter story lines,□ the poem moves away from sound and toward meaning. The lines of a story are combinations of words and sentences, but they have to be held back from being too complex.

Lines 11-12

The □story lines□ referred to in line 10 are not short by their nature. They have been abbreviated by fear, cut down from what they would naturally have been. Line 12 mentions waking up, returning the thought to the direction in which it starts in line 7, setting the situation for these feelings as occurring in the middle of the night, when one's logical defenses are at their weakest.

Lines 13-14

To be in a □quandary□ is to be poised in an uncertain position with no clear course of action presenting itself. The quandary refers to Cassandra's inability to find words sufficient to express the horror that she knows is coming. Although the cause of Cassandra's predicament is clearly identified in ancient myth, McHugh notes that the problem is not simply one of a legendary person. Myths tend to resonate to modern times because they describe the human condition. Mirroring the earlier mention of shorter story lines, the lines of the poem become noticeably narrower starting with lines 13 and 14 and continuing with the next two lines.

Lines 15-16

McHugh ends the poem's first section with two bluntly stated, dire pronouncements. The first one indicates the type of complex situation that usually deserves discussion. That there has been a mistake raises questions such as how the error happened, who caused it, and what things would be like if the mistake had not occurred. The second statement leads into the poem's section break with an air of finality. Just as Cassandra knows that her death is unavoidable, all people know that there is no escape from death. The poem uses such drastic phrasing because, unlike Cassandra, most people do not recognize the seriousness of the end they are faced with. They know about it logically, but they do not feel it.

Lines 17-18

In the beginning of the second section, McHugh refers to humanity in general in terms of boys and girls. Mentioning girls, she uses the term "whiplash," implying a violent reaction in the opposite direction. In this case, it is a revolt against the certainty of death that ends the first section of the poem. When she speaks of boys, McHugh uses the word "eddy," which is a motion contrary to the prevailing current. Both words show that people, particularly young people, push back against the fates they know are coming.

Lines 19-20

The distinction between male and female made in lines 17 and 18 is used in lines 19 and 20 to hint at human closeness, and possibly even love, with the phrases "towardness" and "drawn in." The poem not only is talking about the struggle against inevitable death but also is asserting that this struggle against hopelessness creates the illusion of hope. A cataract is, by definition, an opaque spot on the eye that cannot be seen through, but McHugh claims that through this unclear spot, in the struggle against it, clarity can be found.

Lines 21-22

The possibility of hopefulness continues in lines 21 and 22 as the poem says that even after realizing the certainty of death, the grimness of today will lead one to focus attention on tomorrow. Line 22 takes a more poetic approach. In Venice, gondoliers have traditionally been known for singing for their passengers while navigating the canals. Although this image is in itself romantic, McHugh implies sinister undertones. First is the issue of the passengers, paying attention only to the song and failing to notice where the boat is going. Second, the image is an implied reference to Charon, the ferryman of Greek myth who transports people across the river of death to the afterlife.

Lines 23-24

The "two by two" reference brings the poem back to the division of boys and girls mentioned in line 17. Pairing off into couples is a distraction from the inevitability of death. Being distracted is not necessarily a bad thing. The poem shows that people in couples are willing to head right into death's finality, implying that bonding with another is a way of gaining the courage that language fails to give.

The last line uses the Yiddish term "*veyz mir*," which also is rendered "*vei iz mihr*" and "*vai iz mir*." Yiddish is a Germanic language written in Hebrew and spoken by Jews of Central and Eastern European origin as well as by their descendants. Like the

expression from ancient Greek that begins the poem, this phrase is usually translated with the words that translators ascribe to Cassandra: □woe is me.□

Themes

Language and Meaning

In □Three To's and an Oi,□ McHugh explores the inability of language to express the feelings that human beings have at their most vulnerable moments, the moments □when things get bad□ and the awareness of death is inevitable. At such moments, she says, the complex language that people, even poets, use to surround themselves is useless. McHugh examines the similarities between the language used in times of crisis and the language used by babies first learning to talk. Both types of language rely more on sounds, □dronings,□ than they do on meanings, and both use the simplest, shortest phrases.

That the sounds of words are more important to people under duress than are their meanings implies that the sounds have relevance unto themselves. When they turn their attention away from what words mean, people find that the words still hold some importance to them. In this way, the poem shows that meaning and sound are not opposites but are parts of the same system. The poem uses the song sung by a gondolier to illustrate this point. Although the logical purpose of a gondola ride is to get from one point to another, the trip is made different by the song, and it is the song that travelers remember.

To show the shortcomings of language, McHugh refers to Cassandra, the Greek mythological figure who is blessed with the gift of prophecy but later cursed with being unable to convince anyone that her predictions are true. At a moment of crisis, Cassandra shouts out a nonsense sound, □*ototoi*,□ which translators, in their drive to ascribe meaning to her words, have written as □woe is me.□ McHugh contends that □woe is me□ is not the meaning, that the sound Cassandra is said to make in *Agamemnon* does not have any translation at all. That the sound cannot be converted to meaningful words, however, does not make the expression of emotion any less true or important.

Fatalism

One of the basic premises of □Three To's and an Oi□ is that death is inevitable and that humans spend their lives trying, not always successfully, to forget that basic truth. This idea is introduced into the poem with the story of Cassandra, who is able to see her own death looming as she arrives at the palace of Agamemnon. Faced with her own certain death, Cassandra lets out a cry of nonsensical stuttering. To translate her sheer, unspeakable horror as a simple □woe is me□ diminishes the depth of Cassandra's fear.

McHugh goes beyond Cassandra's story to remind readers that the situation is not Cassandra's alone but is one faced by all people. McHugh points out that people wake in the night in terror, aware that death is at hand and knowing that death is approaching

with the same certainty that Cassandra must feel. After driving home this point by implication□by association with Cassandra and by mention of a situation that people find familiar□the poem states the point bluntly and flatly with no room for equivocation: □We're all about to die.□

Youth

The second part of □Three To's and an Oi□ recedes from the knowledge of death to explore young people who are just coming into that knowledge. McHugh breaks the human race into sexes, but she makes her examples of each sex young: □a girl□ and □a boy.□ Starting from youth enables the poet to trace the ways in which humans build their defenses against the crippling knowledge of death. She has the girl □whiplash□ and the boy □eddy,□ although these actions can easily be reversed. The main thing is that youth responds violently against mortality. McHugh also implies that these strong, violent backlashes are a result of too much □towardness.□ Youth sometimes leans in toward death, examining it with a curiosity that those with more experience do not feel.

Introspection

The point of □Three To's and an Oi□ is to make readers think about the truths that they carry within themselves. When, at the midway point, McHugh states directly that □we're all about to die,□ she has earned the right to cut through illusions by examining the illusions that surround this unequivocal statement. Because the medium of poetry is language, the poet is as destructive of her own illusions as she is of those of others when she points out that the attempt to give coherent meaning to Cassandra's anguished cry is pointless.

The second part of the poem depicts how people proceed from youth, alone or in couples, building systems to distract themselves from the thought of death. When it begins to seem that human intellect can overcome primal fear, however, McHugh explains that the journey of distraction drives people to the very attitude of □woe is me□ (□*veyz mir*□) that translators have tried to impose on Cassandra's anguish, implying that such a verbal twisting of raw emotion, even when one is aware of it, is inevitable.

Style

Short Stanzas

In most poems, the individual lines are clustered into stanzas, or groups of lines. The most common stanza length is the quatrain, or four-line grouping, although the lengths of stanzas can vary from poem to poem and sometimes even within a poem, producing a free-form style, also called □open form.□ □Three To's and an Oi□ is a mix of stanzaic formality with open-form structure. The poem is formal in that McHugh uses two-line stanzas consistently, from start to end. Although the number of lines in each stanza stays the same, the lengths of the lines vary widely throughout the poem, and there is no set meter or rhyme scheme. The consistency of the stanzas gives the poem a measured feel, which indicates the author's control. The lack of other formal elements has the opposite effect, reinforcing the poem's idea of underlying dread, as if the poet is not able to stay with any prolonged sequence of thought owing to an awareness of the futility of logic.

The mention of □shorter story lines□ in line 10 echoes the poem's use of two-line stanzas, with each stanza ending almost as soon as it begins. What keeps the poem from seeming abrupt or halting is the lack of end-stopping: most of the stanzas do not end with punctuation, allowing thoughts to carry over from one stanza to the next. On the page, the two-line stanzas of □Three To's and an Oi□ make the poem look as if it will be composed of many diverse ideas, but listeners who hear the poem read aloud would not be as aware of the individual stanzas and would therefore focus more on the coherency of the ideas.

Literary Allusion

An allusion is a reference to an event in history or literature. It can be overtly stated or merely implied. □Three To's and an Oi□ contains both types of allusion. The reference to Cassandra is clearly announced in the first word. Readers who are familiar with the story or who look it up when they see it mentioned in the poem can see how the events of Cassandra's life apply to the issues being discussed. It would be difficult to make sense of the first section of the poem without knowing that Cassandra has the ability to foretell her own death and that she cries out in anguish when she knows death is looming.

The last stanza, lines 23 and 24, contains an allusion to the biblical story of Noah and the ark and the flood that destroys the world. □Two by two□ is a phrase associated with the way Noah gathers the animals of the earth, assuring that there is a male and a female of each species so that they can reproduce. When this phrase appears with the word □torrents,□ it is clearly meant to remind readers of the story of the ark. Readers can understand the poem without being reminded of the story from the Bible, but

knowing how the story relates to the poem's subject of death and the will to survive makes reading the poem a richer experience.

Historical Context

With its references to ancient Greek drama and languages other than English, "Three To's and an Oi" is considered typical of McHugh's intellectual style of poetry. Good poetry has always been built on references to things outside of itself, whether they are references to well-known classical literature or to universal emotions. Readers sometimes feel, however, that having a degree in literature might be useful, if not necessary, in reading a poem such as this one. The connection between higher education and poetry has grown in recent decades. By the end of the twentieth century, it had become rare for poets to support themselves financially with writing alone. Most modern poets work at other jobs for their income. Some may dabble in writing as a hobby, but those who are serious about writing as their life's work manage to hold down two jobs at once—one that pays and one that does not. Most of those poets make their livings through teaching.

The number of would-be poets and fiction writers expanded toward the end of the twentieth century, as did the number of places where they can teach. Colleges and universities have offered creative writing classes as part of their English programs since the 1800s. Although they have helped some young writers find their creative voice, these individual classes have done little to help writers find a career. Nationally recognized literary figures often have held teaching appointments or honorary professorships at universities. At least until the 1950s in the United States, poetry writing was considered a separate entity from academics.

The Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa is considered the first successful college program focusing strictly on creative writing, that is, poetry and fiction. Started in 1936, in the following decade the workshop was a magnet for famous writers, who came to teach for a semester or to give a lecture. A list of the writers who have been involved with the Iowa Writers' Workshop is practically reproduced in the table of contents of any modern literature textbook, from Robert Frost, Flannery O'Connor, and John Berryman in the early days to Susan Wheeler and Jonathan Franzen later. Graduates of the Writers' Workshop have gone on to create similar programs in creative writing at other institutions.

At the same time that creative writing was growing as a college-level field of study, there was a population explosion in academics. In the years after World War II, college attendance, which had once been limited to people of the upper income brackets, became democratized through the GI Bill of Rights, which paid for the college educations of tens of thousands of veterans who had fought in the war. University English departments expanded, as did the availability of extension sites and community colleges. The influx of new students meant that colleges were able to hire instructors with varied backgrounds. Poets who had not been widely known found employment as college instructors.

Another landmark in the connection between academia and creative writing took place in 1967 with the formation of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs. Founded

by fifteen writers who were themselves graduates of writing programs, the association has grown to include 22,000 teachers, writers, and students and 330 college and university writing programs. Based on a philosophy that the practitioners of an art are best suited to teach that art, the Association of Writers and Writing Programs has encouraged the recognition of creative writing as an important part of English programs, which once focused on literature and rhetoric. One result has been the dominance of intellectual poetry such as McHugh's, which draws from academic source material as naturally as it does from other parts of human experience.

Critical Overview

McHugh has been one of the most important American poets for nearly thirty years. Her 1994 compilation, *Hinge and Sign: Poems, 1968-1993*, a collection of works published in her first twenty-five years as a poet as well as new poems, was nominated for a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize. Peter Turchi notes in *Ploughshares* that the book □demonstrates depth well beyond the early virtuosity, as well as humility, evidence of a writer who is still listening, still learning.□ □Three To's and an Oi□ comes from McHugh's next collection, *The Father of the Predicaments*, which was welcomed by critics as yet another masterly work. Jane Satterfield, in the *Antioch Review*, calls the book a □welcome fourth compilation□ noting that in it □incidents of dramatic and seemingly random stature implode to reveal surprising insights.□

To the extent that there has been any critical negativity toward McHugh's writing, it is that it is sometimes too complex and not always accessible to the common reader. As Doris Lynch points out in her review of *The Father of the Predicaments* in *Library Journal*, □McHugh is a modernist and an extremely cerebral poet, so these poems will not please everyone, but readers interested in language poetry will find poems of interest here.□ Lynch points out that her remarks are not a poor reflection on the poetry but are simply a warning that the book may be better placed in □academic collections and libraries where McHugh has a following.□

The Father of the Predicaments has been held in high regard by important publications. As an unsigned review in the Briefly Noted column of the *New Yorker* explains, the book is considered an □accomplished volume of poems, which illuminates how the contradictions and dualities concealed in language both betray and redeem us.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

David Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, he examines how McHugh's specific sense of organization helps the poem explore diverse and even contradictory ideas.

Reading McHugh's work can make one's head spin. Her poetic vision allows her to recognize the contradictions in life that often escape notice, and she is clearly comfortable with accepting these contradictions. As a writer, McHugh has the fluidity with words' inventiveness to present life's paradoxes as naturally as another poet might describe the petals of a flower. The frustrating thing about reading McHugh's poetry is that it *does* encompass paradoxes□at times it seems that McHugh is changing subjects, changing directions, or even taking up the position opposite the one in the preceding stanza. McHugh's control of poetic style is so strong and sure that the average reader is compelled to keep up with her despite the shifts in tone and subject. It may be a trying experience to mentally follow along with McHugh's poetic range, but it is by no means impossible.

□Three To's and an Oi□ argues persuasively in a few lines that life is a futile quest to suppress the dread of impending, unavoidable death. The poem suggests that people struggle with themselves throughout their lives to see the truth but also that they struggle equally hard to avoid it. These thoughts are not contradictory, but neither do they provide the harmonious continuity that most readers expect of one continuous poem. The imagery ranges from waking with night dread to floating along on a river listening to the song of a gondolier, and the language ranges from Greek to English to Yiddish. Organization is what makes it possible for all of these variables to coexist in the service of one central idea.

This poem about contradictions is physically divided into two parts, which makes it easy for readers to identify the binary nature of McHugh's inquiry□even the least curious reader should be able to see that because it is split in two, this poem must have two points□and to determine what the two ideas may be. The first eight stanzas, lines 1 through 16, explain the poem's stark view of existence. It begins with Cassandra, the clairvoyant of Greek legend who knows that her death is at hand and that there is nothing she can do about it. The first part continues through deeds and mistakes, ending with the horrible but undeniable idea □We're all about to die.□

While pushing the idea of death at the reader, the poem's first section then splits apart into two even smaller ideas, each following naturally from the contemplation of death. The first regards the way in which language breaks down during times of crisis, devolving from the sort of thing that can give intellectual comfort once it is realized that there is no comfort to be had. There is a futility that makes complexity of language (ironically, the kind of language this poem is made of) worthless. Following from the idea of language breakdown is the idea that to avoid the finality of death, humans tend to assign meaning to meaningless expressions of emotion□meaningless not in that they lack value but in that they convey no particular ideas. McHugh objects to translating

Cassandra's cry of grief as if she means to express the idea □woe is me,□ because there is no particular thought meant by □*ototoi*,□ just pure emotion.

The foregoing discussion of the three main concepts of the first part of □Three To's and an Oi□□knowledge of death, breakdown of meaning, and the use of meaningless expressions□proceeds in the order in which the concepts derive from one another. In the poem, however, the concepts appear in the reverse order. McHugh goes from language to meaning to dread to obliteration with her early reference to Cassandra, a reference loaded with associations. Readers come into the poem with thoughts already flowing. The more important aspect, though, is that McHugh dissects these ideas methodically and with a calm, even pace. By limiting her stanzas to two lines each, McHugh feeds thoughts to readers in manageable bites. Stringing the ideas together as the poet does helps readers follow the logical implications from one step to the next.

The second part of the poem is less methodical than the first. Ideas bounce around and double over on one another, presenting variations on one theme. This discussion by implication is what readers usually expect of poetry. The second part of □Three To's and an Oi□ can stand as a poem on its own, albeit a much more obscure one without the discussion that precedes it.

The main subject of the second part of the poem is □towardness,□ an idea not even raised in the first part. The second section starts not with towardness but with its opposite, with boys and girls □reeling back□ from one another after being close, evoking a visual after-passion scene more graphic than anything in the first section. After this dramatic opening, with people snapping back like rubber bands, the rest of the poem follows the slow, mesmeric way with which the world lulls humanity toward the comfort that is rejected in the poem. Music and two-by-two coupling are the examples given for the sorts of things that can make people forget their moments of clarity.

The second part of the poem, like the first, is characterized by opposition. Not only are there boys and girls jumping away from one another, but there is also the contrast of language. The section that begins with □whiplash,□ □eddy,□ and □reeling□ ends passively with □turn□ and □bow.□ Tomorrow is placed in opposition to today; the gondolier is separated from the tune. After the first part of the poem differentiates preverbal awareness of death and the intellect's struggle to bury that awareness with words, the second part puts the opposition into motion, and suppression always wins. It is not until the last line that the poem brings back the third main idea from the first section□that expressions such as □woe is me□ exist in a middling state. These expressions acknowledge the misery of the human condition but acknowledge it with a cliché. *Veyz mir* is often expressed as the hackneyed *oy vey*, which means roughly the same thing as *veyz mir* but has come to be so overused that it has less to do with real woe than with the slightest of discomforts. The expression has no meaning, nor is it an expression, as □*ototoi*□ is, of pre-meaning emotion. At least this faint echo brings the poem back to the lament from Cassandra that it starts with.

The other outstanding technique that helps McHugh pack so many complex ideas into □Three To's and an Oi□ is her sense of wordplay. Poetry is always about playing with

words, but there are not many poets who piece ideas, sounds, and meanings together with as much glee as McHugh does. Readers must always be on the lookout for references that when explored lead the poem into new areas of significance. An example is the use of the word □cataract□ in the phrase □clarity from cataract.□ The word is most often associated with a condition of the eye in which the lens becomes cloudy or opaque, making it difficult to see through. Insisting that one can gain clarity from such a situation is to imply that sight itself is misleading and that one understands more from lack of sight, as the first part of the poem makes a case that one understands more from lack of meaning. □Cataract□ has a second meaning, though, that is less often applied: a waterfall. This meaning fits perfectly into the water imagery of the second part of the poem, from □eddy□ to □gondolier□ to □torrents.□

Another wording easy to miss is the phrase □it isn't Greek for nothing.□ The poem is saying primarily that the expression in question, □*ototoi*,□ does not mean □nothing□ in Greek. But McHugh writes the word □nothing□ without the quotation marks that would identify it as a definition. This technique opens up the phrase to another meaning. If the meaning of □Greek□ as in the common phrase □It's all Greek to me□□in which the word is used to signify something that is unintelligible and cannot be understood□is applied, the poem says, □It isn't unintelligible for nothing.□ The meaning is that something requires □*ototoi*□ to actually be unintelligible, that there is a good reason to say translating the cry as □woe is me□ misses the mark.

The title □Three To's and an Oi□ is conspicuous because it refers to words that do not actually appear in the poem. One has to look for them. The first place they are found is in the focal word □*ototoi*.□ The presence of the □to's□ and the □oi□ is obscured because the □oi□ is broken up, so that its □o□ comes at the start of Cassandra's expression and its □i□ comes at the end. Strained as it is, this interpretation of the title is the more literal one. The more fanciful interpretation entails reading the last stanza, lines 23 and 24, closely. The □to's□ are really the □into's□ that begin lines 22 through 24, showing the mind being sucked from primordial understanding to intellectual complacence. The *oi* is implied in the phrase *veyz mir*, referring to a standard complaint when things go wrong, *oy vey*. It mirrors and mocks the seriousness of Cassandra's situation, putting her fear of death on the level of any number of other complaints that a person may bemoan.

□Three To's and an Oi□ is an example of poetry at its intellectual best. It tackles a philosophical subject always lingering on the edges of human awareness and layers onto one basic truth multiple implications. A less-skilled hand would not be able to pack so much inquiry into the small space that this poem occupies, but McHugh does so with a smoothness and certainty that make it all seem natural. Much in the poem deserves exploration, but much is revealed without great effort. The poem works on so many levels that it has something to say to everyone.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on □Three To's and an Oi,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

McHugh is one of the writers featured on a 1992 recording by the Academy of American Poets called *Heather McHugh and Gerald Stern CD*. Robert Pinsky introduces both readers. It is available on audiocassette and compact disc.

McHugh is included on *Distance Was the House in Which I Welcomed You : Seven Chancellors of the Academy of American Poets,* recorded by the Academy of American Poets in 2003 and available on compact disc.

Topics for Further Study

Find two different translations of Aeschylus's play *Agamemnon* and point out five or more differences in the translations. For each, write a paragraph explaining which you think is more appropriate and why.

Do a search of news stories from the past year. Compile cases in which the word "Cassandra" has been used to refer to a person whose truthful predictions have been ignored. On the basis of your findings, nominate a figure in the news who you think will be the next Cassandra.

Child development experts differ in their opinions of how language develops in babies. Form teams to debate two theories about when infant language begins to take on meaning.

The last two words of "Three To's and an Oi," *veyz mir*, are Yiddish words that are presented without translation. Look for poems that use words or phrases from other languages, and compile them along with their meanings. See if you can compose a found poem made entirely of foreign words taken from other poems.

McHugh refers to the tunes sung by gondoliers. Listen to or read the lyrics of Gilbert and Sullivan's light opera *The Gondoliers* (1889), and write your own gondola song specifically meant to distract people from the idea of death.

What Do I Read Next?

The death of Cassandra is only one of the subjects of *Agamemnon* (458 b.c.e.), by the ancient Greek dramatist Aeschylus. The main story concerns the plot by Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, to murder him after he returns from the Trojan War. She takes revenge because Agamemnon has sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia, for the cause of war.

McHugh's understanding of the deeper meaning of Greek mythology serves her well in her 2001 translation of *Cyclops*, by Euripides. It is the only Greek satyr play still existing, and McHugh adds to it a sense of wordplay and wit.

McHugh's poetry has been compared to that of many other contemporary poets. One of the most frequently mentioned is Louise Glück. Readers can get to know Glück's style through poems such as □Parados,□ which is included in her collection *Ararat* (1994).

McHugh's style has also been linked to that of the poet Richard Hugo. Readers can learn about the theory behind a poet who works as McHugh does by reading Hugo's *The Triggering Town: Essays and Lectures on Poetry and Writing* (1979).

The novelist Christa Wolf retells the story of the Trojan War through the eyes of Cassandra in *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays* (1984).

Further Study

Becker, Robin, "The Poetics of Engagement," in *American Poetry Review*, Vol. 30, No. 6, November/December 2001, pp. 11-15.

In this article, Becker reviews books by eight American women poets, including McHugh, and points out the similarities of the times.

Harvey, Matthea, "Heather McHugh," in *Bomb*, Summer 2005, pp. 82-88.

This interview brings up matters of style and method in McHugh's works that reflect directly on "Three To's and an Oi."

Murphy, Bruce F., "Verse Versus Poetry," in *Poetry*, Vol. 177, No. 3, January 2001, pp. 279-86.

An analysis of prose poetry, a form that McHugh often uses, includes discussion of her overall technique and reputation.

Schapira, Laurie Layton, *The Cassandra Complex: Living with Disbelief*, Inner City Books, 1988.

Schapira takes a Jungian psychological approach to the Cassandra story, looking at how its meaning has changed through age and cultures.

Bibliography

Lynch, Doris, Review of *The Father of the Predicaments*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 124, No. 13, September 1999, p. 98.

McHugh, Heather, □Three To's and an Oi,□ in *The Father of the Predicaments*, University Press of New England, 1999, pp. 28-29.

Review of *The Father of the Predicaments*, in the *New Yorker*, November 29, 1999, p. 124.

Satterfield, Jane, Review of *The Father of the Predicaments*, in the *Antioch Review*, Vol. 28, No. 2, Spring 2004, p. 247.

Turchi, Peter, □About Heather McHugh,□ in *Ploughshares*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Spring 2001, p. 216.

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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