What Belongs to Us Study Guide

What Belongs to Us by Marie Howe

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Introduction

"What Belongs to Us" is included in Marie Howe's first book, *The Good Thief* (1988), which Margaret Atwood picked for the National Poetry Series Award in 1987. In twenty long free-verse lines, the poem lists things that people can never really own, including phone numbers, memories, other people, the past and, ironically, their own pain. Howe's primary theme is the transitory nature of human life, the idea that "all things must pass." Rather than making abstract metaphysical comments on life, however, Howe piles up images to make her point. The cumulative "weight" of her list hits readers, so they reconsider exactly what it is they *do* own, if anything. Many of the poems in the collection are of a spiritual nature, as is the tone of "What Belongs to Us." Although the speaker uses personal memories to make her claim, memories accessible only to her, she universalizes her experience, suggesting that all people have similar memories. She does this to emphasize the idea that individual identity is illusory and that individual human consciousness is part of a larger cosmic consciousness. This notion is rooted in Eastern religious traditions, and in the American poetic tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, among others.

Author Biography

Marie Howe was born in 1950 in Rochester, New York, the oldest of nine children. Telling stories was a way of life for her family and the household of eleven people assured her of a ready audience. Raised Catholic, she attended the Sacred Heart Convent School, where Howe says the nuns modeled what it meant to live a spiritually active and politically engaged life. After taking a bachelor of science degree from the University of Windsor, Howe had a short career as a journalist in Rochester, writing for a few local papers. She did not begin taking herself seriously as a poet until she turned thirty, after attending a poetry workshop for high school teachers with Karen Pelz at Dartmouth College. She credits that workshop with changing her life. A few years later, she enrolled in Columbia's master of fine arts program, where she studied with Stanley Kunitz.

Howe soon began publishing in literary journals and magazines, and, in 1989, Margaret Atwood chose Howe's book *The Good Thief* as a winner in the National Poetry Series. Howe also received the Peter Lavan Younger Poet Prize from the Academy of American Poets for the book. Many of the collection's poems, such as "What Belongs to Us," tackle themes of loss, memory, and love, and the impermanence of individual identity. Howe, whose brother, John, died of AIDS, has also co-edited a collection of essays on the disease, *In the Company of My Solitude: American Writing and the AIDS Pandemic*, with Michael Klein. Her most recent collection of poems is *What the Living Do* (1997) and was named one of the five best books of poetry published in 1997 by *Publishers Weekly*. Howe has received fellowships from the Massachusetts Artist Foundation, the Fine Arts Work Center, Radcliffe College's Bunting Institute, The St. Botolph Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation. She teaches at Sarah Lawrence College in New York.

Poem Text

Not the memorized phone numbers.
The carefully rehearsed short cuts home.
Not the summer, shimmering like pavement, when Lucia
pushed Billy off the rabbit house and broke his arm,

or our tiny footprints in the back files.
Not the list of kings from Charlemagne to Henry
not the boxes under our beds
or Tommy's wedding day when it was so hot and Mark played the flute
and we waved at him waving from the small round window in the loft,

the great gangs of people stepping one by one into the cold water.

I have, of course, a photograph:
you and I getting up from a couch.

Full height, I stand almost two inches taller than you
but the photograph doesn't show that,
just the two of us in motion
not looking at each other, smiling.

Not even the way we said things, leaning against the kitchen counter.

Not the cabin where I burned my arm and you said, oh, you're the type
that even if it hurt, you wouldn't say.

Not even the blisters. Look.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-5

"What Belongs to Us" is a list poem, the subject of which is signaled by the title. Think of how lists are made, with a subject such as "Stuff to do on the house," or "Chores." However, Howe inverts the subject, and instead of listing "what belongs to us," she lists what doesn't belong "to us," "us" being humanity. She begins the poem with an item familiar to most readers: memorized phone numbers. On a literal level, the reader can't own the numbers because they are someone else's numbers. On another level, they are a product of memory and circumstance, both of which change with time (i.e., people lose their memories, and people move and get new phone numbers). The "short cuts home" also don't belong to people, as the short cuts exist outside of them, and the childhood summer she remembers is long gone, a thing of the past. The simile "shimmers like pavement" makes a comparison between how pavement shimmers in the sun and how the memory shimmers in the speaker's mind. The last item in the list, the "tiny footprints in the back files," also refers to a childhood event: children's footprints in a medical file or children innocently walking over their parents' things. These images border on the sentimental and the cute.

Lines 6-10

The items in these lines refer to things in the public domain. Historical information such as a list of kings does not belong to anyone because, para- doxically, it belongs to everyone. These items also appear to be from her childhood. The list of kings is information the speaker probably had to remember for school. Charlemagne (742-814) refers to Charles the Great or Charles I, the Frankish king (768-814) and emperor of the West (800-814). Charlemagne organized the beginnings of the Holy Roman Empire. Henry refers to Henry VIII (1491-1547) of Britain, the second son of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York. The boxes under the bed are a staple of many children's "secret life," and Tommy's wedding day is an event she witnessed and remembers in great detail. The image of her waving to Mark and him waving back suggests the idea not only of greeting, but of parting as well. It is also an image packed with the speaker's self-consciousness, as it demonstrates her awareness of her awareness. The tenth line is perhaps the most mysterious in the poem. Though there is no explicit reference, it suggests a baptismal ceremony, or perhaps Hindus stepping into the Ganges River for healing and worship.

Lines 11-16

The "I" enters the poem for the first time in these lines when the speaker announces she has a photograph, as if a photograph were the perfect evidence that something occurred in the past, and that occurrence could still be owned. The "you" is never

named, but readers now understand that the poem is addressed to this "you." Lines 13-16 describe the photograph, what it does and does not show. The description, again, evokes the speaker's selfconsciousness. That the two people are "in motion / not looking at each other, smiling" emphasizes the emotional distance between human beings, even those close to one another. It underscores the existential idea that human beings are born alone and die alone.

Lines 17-20

In these lines, the speaker picks up with her list of what does not "belong to us." The "we" refers to the speaker and the person in the photograph. By the speaker's description, readers can assume that the two are very close, perhaps siblings or close childhood friends. The last item listed is the blisters on the speaker's arm. She claims that not even they belong to her. This idea underscores the motif of self-consciousness in the poem, as it positions the speaker outside of her body, being in it but not of it. The last word in the poem, "Look," performs a similar function, as it abruptly ends the list of descriptions with a startling command.

Themes

Loss

"What Belongs to Us" evokes the idea of loss, even as it suggests that the very idea of possessing anything is an illusion. In item after item, Howe hammers away at the notion that attachment to things defines human beings. By questioning the validity of worldly attachment as a means of comforting oneself, Howe implicitly suggests that it is only by renouncing the worldly that human beings can find true peace. That the speaker of the poem has achieved a kind of spiritual peace is evident in the last line of the poem, when, apparently, she has separated herself from even physical pain.

Nostalgia

Howe's poem both exhibits a persistent nostalgia and emphasizes the idea that such thinking only leads to grief. Nostalgia is a longing for the past, and more specifically defined, a severe homesickness. Marketers, artists, writers, and poets evoke nostalgia to capture audience attention and sell their products, whether they are beer, cars, or poems. By presenting a list of her childhood memories, specific in their detail, the speaker implicitly highlights their importance in her own life. Rather than embrace these memories, however, the speaker uses them to show that they are mere representations of events that will never return. In essence, she has it both ways: she expresses nostalgia while at the same time renouncing it.

Identity

The notion that human beings possess identity, that is, something that belongs only to them and makes them who they are, is an assumption undergirding Christianity and much of the political and economic foundation of Western countries. Howe questions this assumption, suggesting that those features conventionally used to establish individual human identity do not belong to individuals at all, but are constructs used to categorize and name human experience.

Style

List

By constructing the poem as a list, Howe is able to evoke ideas and emotions through repetition. Auxesis is the cataloging of a series that closes at the zenith, or high point, of the set. In Howe's case, that "zenith" of the set is her own pain. Not even it belongs to her. In its structure, Howe's poem also resembles a litany. Litanies can be prayers consisting of a series of invocations or supplications, or more simply a repetitive chant. Another prayer-like element of the poem is its focus on the relationship between mind and body. Other poets who have used lists extensively in their poetry to comment on mind-body issues include Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, Diane Wakoski, and Mark Strand.

Tone

The tone of Howe's poem is elegiac. Elegies are poems or songs that mourn the loss of something or someone. Although "What Belongs to Us" doesn't mourn an individual, it does evoke a sense of loss, nostalgia, and sorrow. Much of this emotion, however, is in response to the speaker's sense that very little belongs to her, rather than sadness over the larger losses of humanity in general.

Diction and Audience

Howe's poem uses prose-like rhythms and everyday speech. She "speaks" matter-of-factly, using little figurative language. She addresses a specific (unnamed) and absent person, and readers are in the position of overhearing a "conversation." This practice of addressing an absent person is called apostrophe, and it has a long tradition in Western poetry. The references she makes are familiar to the person she is addressing, but not to readers. This is in keeping with Howe's poetics. David Daniel quotes Howe as saying about her poetry, "Poetry is telling something to someone. . . . It's between them. It can't happen alone, without being said aloud. It's physical, social, erotic."

Historical Context

Howe's poem was written during the Reagan administration of the mid-1980s, when acquiring wealth and material things had become almost a religion to many Americans. Although she makes no explicit references to public historical events, the speaker does recount personal history. The nostalgia these memories illustrate, along with Howe's age, mark her as a Baby Boomer, that is, one born between 1946 and 1964 (Howe was born in 1950). In contrast to the 1960s and 1970s, decades defined by Americans' pursuit of spiritual and political action, the 1980s were characterized by an ethic focused on consumption and acquisition of material things. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the United States had experienced a recession, but pulled out of it under Reagan's policies of deregulation, which ignited a bull market. The growing economy lasted until the beginning of 2000.

Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street* illustrates the widespread obsession with making money during this time. Baby boomers, many of who had renounced the values of capitalism in the 1960s and 1970s, helped fuel the market boom, as they climbed the career ladder, bought houses, and poured money into 401(k)s and individual retirement accounts. *Newsweek* dubbed boomers who now focused on their careers and achieving the American Dream "yuppies" (young urban professionals), and defined them as people between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-nine, with incomes of at least $40,000, who were professionals and managers. On October 19th, 1987, what has come to be known as "Black Monday," the stock market crashed. The financial industry was hit hard, and many people were laid off. This proved to be a small hiccup, however, in the bull market, which continued its run shortly thereafter.

The emergence and rapid spread of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) during the 1980s into a worldwide epidemic deepened the sense of mortality for people throughout the world. Although the disease was identified in the early part of the decade, it was only after celebrities such as actor Rock Hudson died from AIDS complications that Americans began to take the disease seriously. Prompted by the fact that AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease, Americans underwent a wholesale change in sexual behavior. The gay community was especially hard hit, as a disproportionate number of gay men contracted and died from the disease.

Critical Overview

Because Howe has authored only two collections of poems, there has been little criticism written about her work. The cover of Howe's collection carries these words by Margaret Atwood, who chose *The Good Thief* for the National Poetry Series: "These poems are intensely felt, sparely expressed, and difficult to forget; poems of obsession that transcend their own dark roots." Under Atwood's words are those of Stanley Kunitz, Howe's former teacher at Columbia, and mentor. Kunitz writes, "Marie Howe's poetry is luminous, intense, and elegant, rooted in an abundant inner life . . . In essence, she is a religious poet, that rarity among writers of her generation." Reviewing the collection for *The Partisan Review*, Bonnie Costello also notes the poems' religious orientation, saying that Howe, "may well have a career as a poet of spiritual instruction." Noting the poet's tendency towards transcendence, Costello writes, "Howe's best poems refuse to make the body the measure of the soul." Rochelle Ratner, while praising the collection as a whole, questions the accessibility of some of the poems. In her review for *Library Journal*, she argues that the poems embody a "fashionable surrealism," but that Howe could be more direct about the emotional issues from which they spring.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition whose essays, poems, and stories regularly appear in journals and magazines. In this essay, Semansky considers the idea of belonging in "What Belongs to Us."

In "What Belongs to Us," Howe explicitly questions human beings' relationship to the world and to themselves by examining assumptions under girding notions of individuality and belonging. She does this through questioning the ways in which Western selfhood has been represented.

The idea of belonging is powerful. People belong to families, to jobs, to communities, to churches. They believe in ideas, in things, in one another, in order to be a part of something bigger than them, to give their lives meaning and purpose. Poet John Donne wrote that "No man is an island," meaning that people need one another to survive, to prosper, to simply be. However, belonging isn't necessarily a choice that one makes. Human beings can't choose their parents or their genes, the country of their birth, their language, sex, or, some might argue, their sexuality. By writing a poem about all that does not belong to human beings, Howe asks the reader to consider himself as a process in flux, rather than a stable point in the midst of changing world. In this sense, her poem is implicitly more interested in asking questions about the importance of belonging and having, rather than offering elaborate explanations for the way things are.

If belonging is understood as meaning the property of a person or thing, in what way can memories be said not to belong to people? Howe's poem makes this very claim as she enumerates memories from her childhood and then disowns them. Howe represents these memories differently, showing the complications of living in a world where all experience is mediated by language. She lists memories of words, numbers, and images, describes a photograph, and presents a physical wound, all to show how they, in fact, do not constitute evidence of permanence or selfhood. Her images of the past evoke a kind of dreamy netherworld, in which the speaker grapples to keep the past alive. Howe draws on her own memories to select incidents most readers can not only see, but also empathize with. She renounces the "summer, shimmering like pavement, when Lucia / pushed Billy off the rabbit house and broke his arm." The reader doesn't know who Billy and Lucia are, but he doesn't need to. Most readers' memories of childhood are made up of antics like the ones Howe describes. They are so widespread that they are almost generic. Implicit in the speaker's renunciation of these memories is the idea that, paradoxically, they do not make up her identity. It is paradoxical because the speaker obviously still retains these memories, and describes them to show that they are not a part of her and, by extension, that a reader's memories may not be part of them, either.

In the West, it is common to believe that one's memory makes up a large part of one's identity, and Westerners largely see identity as continuous, coherent, and unified. Memories are part of the glue of identity, and human beings use language to describe those memories. But memories by their very nature, whether they be of a phone

number or of an event, are representations of something outside of the individual human being, both in time and space; they stand in for the original action or event. In this sense, they do not belong to individuals, but to an unrecoverable past. Memories do not belong to human beings because they are processes, rather than discrete things that can be held, touched, felt. Memories are "jogged" by ideas, sights, sounds, words, expressions, and circumstances, and so they are also, to a large extent, random and unpredictable. They are contingent upon other people and events for their very existence. "Short cuts home," which the speaker mentions in the second line, are also a kind of memory, a memory that becomes a physical habit.

The objects of Howe's renunciation are also kinds of evidence for human presence, the idea that individuals are separate, self-contained entities, "belonging" to themselves, and conscious of themselves. Evidence is a form of representation. Semioticians define and often categorize the relationship between a thing and what it represents into three categories: icon, symbol, and index. An iconic representation, for example, might be a statue of a woman. The statue stands for the woman because it resembles her in some way. A symbolic representation, however, is not based on resemblance, but on convention, that is, a social agreement that x will stand for whatever. Language is a form of symbolic representation because there is no resemblance between a word and what it represents unless people agree there is. Indexical representation is based on cause and effect. It indicates connectedness or physical proximity between something and something else. In making claims for all that does not belong to human beings, Howe attempts to provoke the reader, to unsettle the reader's own sense of belonging to others, to the world, to themselves. When she writes that not even "our tiny footprints in the back files" belong to us, she is questioning not only memory, but also the continuity of human identity. As a form of indexical representation, these tiny footprints can be understood as evidence of someone's presence. They are the effect of a particular cause: small children walking over paper. But the people to whom these footprints belong no longer exist. They have grown into adults, one of whom remembers the footprints and writes down that memory (itself a representation) in words in a poem, creating an image in the reader's mind.

Photographs combine iconic and indexical representation. The photograph that Howe's speaker mentions is unusual because she cites it, paradoxically, as evidence of absence:

I have, of course, a photograph:
you and I getting up from a couch.
Full height, I stand almost two inches taller than
you
but the photograph doesn't show that,
just the two of us in motion
not looking at each other, smiling.

The "you," a pronoun standing in for a noun, is never named, but his presence in the photo allows the speaker to describe herself in relation to him. Not only does the photograph not show the true heights of the speaker and her companion, it cannot show

anything apart from what the speaker describes. Words, in this case, are used to represent an image, an image to which the reader has no access.

The introduction of the photograph also marks the introduction of the speaking "I" in the poem, as well as the "I"'s audience, "you." Looking back at the poem, the reader now sees that the "you" would understand references to Lucia and Billy, and the other childhood memories listed. This puts the reader in a different position, as an eavesdropper on an intimate conversation between the speaker and someone close to her.

Howe's poem proceeds like this, in an infinite regress of representation, of words standing in for memories standing in for images, and so on. No thing exists by itself, but is always contingent upon some other thing, or person, some other words. Buddhists have a name for this idea of relationality: emptiness. In his study, *Buddhism without Beliefs*, Stephen Batchelor writes, "Emptiness does not describe how . . . things exist; it merely describes how they are devoid of an intrinsic, separate being." Batchelor argues that the more people try to latch onto the idea of the self, defining it, protecting it, naming it, the more they create anguish for themselves, for the self is no one thing, but a system of interacting processes and circumstances. He writes:

We have been created, molded, formed by a bewildering
matrix of contingencies that have preceded us.
From the patterning of the DNA derived from our
parents to the firing of the hundred billion neurons
in our brains to the cultural and historical conditioning
of the twentieth century to the education and upbringing
given us to all the experiences we have ever
had and choices we have ever made: these have conspired
to configure the unique trajectory that culminates
in this present moment.

This moment too, must pass, and that's what Howe's poem wants the reader to grasp. Instead of seeing oneself as separate from others, from nature, from time and space itself, identifiable as this or that kind of person, her poem asks the reader to think of themselves as part of cosmic consciousness, as transient accumulations of cells, thoughts, air, water, earth, already beginning to break down and become something else. Her speaker demonstrates an eerie separation from even her own body, when she holds forth her blistered arm for her companion to see, as if her own wound were evidence of her non-attachment to the world.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "What Belongs to Us," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Blevins is an essayist and poet who has taught at Hollins University, Sweet Briar College, and in the Virginia Community College system. In this essay, Blevins argues that a study of the discursive mode in Howe's poem reveals that idea, when married to image and music, may bring the beauties of image and music into very sharp focus.

By articulating a preference for the concrete and particular over the abstract, poets like William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound made the image reign supreme in twentieth-century American poetry. A desire "to grasp the fluid, absolutely particular life of the physical world," as the American poet and critic Robert Pinksy says of the modernist preference for the image in *The Situation of Poetry*, requires a preference for the descriptive mode of discourse. In the descriptive mode, writers avoid abstraction and statement, choosing instead to *present feelings*, thoughts, observations, and sensations by using similes, metaphors, and other figures of speech to construct the visual pictures we call images. While there can be no doubt that images are essential to poetry, in recent years some poets have begun to realize that a preference for the descriptive mode has dominated American poetry to the point of injury. One such American poet is Marie Howe.

The descriptive mode describes the way that poets or writers use concrete terms (like roses) to ornament and present abstract ideas (like love). The narrative mode describes people moving through time, and the effects their actions have on the world around them. In the discursive mode, poets tell readers what is happening, rather than showing them, through the use of analysis, exposition, or rhetoric. An exploration of Marie Howe's "What Belongs to Us" must partly be an exploration of the way the discursive mode works in some of current American poetry since so much of the poem is made up of ideas, rather than things, and is told, rather than shown.

"What Belongs to Us" explores the allusive nature of childhood and□by extension□of all experience. It investigates the speaker's memory of her childhood by listing the memories and bodies of knowledge that can't be possessed, or owned. In other words, the poem makes a dreamy statement about the way hindsight or retrospect can turn the act of remembering into a nonspecific and therefore spiritual enterprise. Howe's use of the discursive mode contributes to the poem's ambiguity since ideas are automatically abstract. The sense of ambiguity in Howe's poem makes the old and common experience of remembering childhood unfamiliar to us: it reinvigorates an ordinary act by placing it into a poetic space that is hazy and indefinite and in so doing does what poems should do with recollected experience. The poem's first line□ "Not the memorized phone numbers"□expresses not a phone number, but the fact that the "memorized phone numbers," according to the title, do not "belong to us." The poem's second line refers to a part of childhood that also cannot be possessed and is an idea in the sense that it does not present a "carefully rehearsed short [cut] home" so much as *state* that those paths, as well, are not to be possessed. In other words, the first two lines of "What Belongs to Us" are completely discursive.

In the discursive mode, a poet's voice and unique system of thought can dominate a poem: statements expressing ideas, while abstract, tell us how speakers *think* more directly than images do. By beginning in the discursive mode, Howe establishes the authority of her voice. An authoritative and emphatic voice is especially important in an expression of vague, unsupported ideas. That is, if readers are going to accept the initial premise of a poem that begins in the discursive mode, they will do so because of the tone of the speaker's voice, rather than because of anything specific the speaker says or reveals about her skill with image and music. Although the speaker doesn't tell us much in her first two lines, she does establish a certain kind of authority over her subject matter by using the statement's inherent emphatic tone. That tone is necessary because there are no images□there's not even music□to make the first two lines compelling.

The poem moves from its discursive opening to a use of the descriptive mode in stanza three. That stanza opens with an actual image□"Not the summer, shimmering like pavement"□and then moves to a memory about someone named "Lucia," who "pushed Billy off the rabbit house and broke his arm." The image in this stanza demands attention and is thereby able to slow down the poem's movement forward. That is, since the poem's first two lines present no visuals or experience for the senses, the reader welcomes the image in the poem's third line that the "summer [is] shimmering like pavement." The alliteration of the /s/ sound in "summer" and "shimmering" contributes to the power of this image. It's also interesting to note how different the "summer, shimmering" image is from the actual memory about Lucia in this stanza. Although the Lucia memory produces a kind of picture, it does not work like the image made with the simile. It is more discursive in the sense that it makes a statement: it records a fact and therefore does not come from the imagination like the second stanza's image does. The tension between the "summer, shimmering" image and the less-imagistic, but visual line about Lucia reveals that a constant movement between the various modes of discourse can help give a poem energy.

The poem's fifth line□"or our tiny footprints in the back files"□combines both fact and imagination. That is, the children in the speaker's family probably had, on their birth certificates, "tiny footprints in the back files" of a doctor's office, but because the rhythm in this line takes great advantage of the hard stresses of monosyllabic words□ every word but "footprints," which might also be read as containing two hard stresses, is monosyllabic□ it is much more musical than the discursive lines that opened the poem. The repetition of the /i/ sound in "tiny" and "files" and alliteration in "footprints" with "files" contributes, as well, to this stanza's music. The tension between the lack of music in the poem's first two lines and the gradually increasing music, or lyricism, in it serves to increase the poem's pacing, or suspense.

The poem progresses as it had begun, listing in the negative what cannot "belong" to the speaker and her siblings in stanzas made of one and two, often end-stopped, lines. In the poem's sixth line, the author moves to a more discursive statement with "Not the lists of kings from Charlemagne to Henry." This line is discursive because a list is more of an idea than an object. But notice that Howe will not express ideas for long without making music to counteract them. The alliteration in "not the boxes under our beds" in

the poem's sixth line works to save the Charlemagne line from becoming too flat. Then, in a stanza much like the poem's third stanza, we move to another memory of "Tommy's wedding day when it was so hot and Mark played the flute / and we waved at him waving from the small round window in the loft." The sound play in this stanza is as noticeable as was the image about the "summer, shimmering like pavement." Again, because there has been discursive language leading up to that line in lines like "Not the list of kings from Charlemagne to Henry," the music here comes into sharp focus. The alliteration of the /w/ sound in "wedding," "when," "we," "waved," "waving," and "window" is picked up again in the poem's tenth line, when Howe writes about "the great gangs of people stepping one by one into the cold water." The music in these two lines is really very stunning. Not only does the /w/ sound in "water" rhyme with that sound in the poem's eighth and ninth lines, the alliteration of the guttural /g/ sound in "great gangs" is countered by the many long and short /o/ sounds in the line, as well.

The movement from the use of the discursive mode in the poem's first two lines to the descriptive mode in the poem's third line in the image about the summer to the intensely lyrical music in the poem's eighth, ninth, and tenth lines works almost the way suspense would in a narrative poem. That is, Howe's progression from a flatly discursive line to a more imaginative line to a more musical line gives the poem its energy and increasingly fervent tone. In so doing, Howe mimics the way the emotions that memories elicit gradually increase in feeling and heat.

"What Belongs to Us" turns, much like a sonnet, in its eleventh line, with a shift from the catalogue of statements to a specific memory about a certain photograph. Structurally, this movement imitates the increased heat or fervor because it moves from the general (the list of what can't belong) to the specific (this very photograph). The reader finds out in line 12 that the poem is addressed to the person who is "getting up from a couch" in a photograph. Although the speaker doesn't give us the identity of the person she's addressing, the reader can assume from the poem's context that the person is a sibling. This information increases the poem's intimacy since suddenly the reader realizes he is eavesdropping on a private conversation. Although the reader may be curious about what, if anything, does belong to the speaker, stanza nine offers no such clues. It is as negative as are the poem's first ten lines. That is, the poet describes not so much what the photograph shows as what the photograph "doesn't show," which is that the speaker "stand[s] almost two inches taller" than the person she's addressing. This stanza reinforces the conflict between what adults remember of childhood and the actual objects people use to record their memories. In other words, people cannot own photographs any more than they can own "the carefully rehearsed short cuts home" or the "list of kings from Charlemagne to Henry." What the photograph does record is "just the two of us in motion / not looking at each other, smiling." What the photograph *does reveal* is just a sense of movement, of motion, that Howe suggests in this poem is the essence of the act of remembering.

Howe returns to her catalogue in the seventeenth line, reinforcing the poem's overall catalogue shape. Here the reader gets another list of what does not belong to the speaker and the sibling she's addressing. The lines in these stanzas are much like the poem's opening lines□they are empathic statements that present very little. The reader

is offered the vague image of two children "leaning against the kitchen counter," but is not told what the children look like. The poem's eighteenth line contains another specific memory, of an occasion on which the speaker "burned [her] arm." The other child in the photograph□the "you" of the poem□ said, "oh, you're the type / that even if it hurt, you wouldn't say." This statement says more about the speaker than the person to whom the poem is addressed, and reminds the reader that poems using the discursive mode can point backwards to their speakers in psychologically significant ways.

The memory of the burn moves the reader to the poem's last line, a reference to blisters. The imperative "look" in this last line makes a demand on both the person the speaker addresses and the poem's readers. It is a fragment of one word, a verb, and ironically recalls what people do when they experience the world with the sense of sight, which is often what they do when they experience poetic images. After a long catalogue of the memories that cannot be owned by children, the speaker demands that the reader "look." The reader supposes he is being commanded to look at the photograph that has just been mentioned. But that photograph offers nothing concrete to look *at*□just two children "in motion, not looking at each other, smiling." Then the reader understands that he is being asked to look at motion itself.

Howe's movement in "What Belongs to Us," from the discursive to the imagistic to the lyrical and back again, has enacted the idea that memory is more motion than image. In so doing, it reveals that poems that actively employ more than one mode of discourse can be put into rhetorical forms and modes that mimic content. For these and other reasons, it seems clear that the discursive mode can be effective in poems; sometimes it can even make the images and music poetry relies on even more beautiful than they would otherwise be.

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on "What Belongs to Us," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

American University in Washington, D.C., has two audiocassettes of Howe reading her poems. The first is a recording of Howe reading with Allen Barnett, recorded in 1991, and is part of the university's Visiting Writer Series. The second was recorded in 1998 and is also part of the writer's series.

The English Department of The State University of New York at Brockport sponsors readings by and discussions with poets in The Brockport Writers Forum. All of these readings and discussions are videotaped and archived. In 1988 Stan Sanvel Rubin hosted a session with Howe, in which she discusses the craft of poetry. The tape order number is V-447.

Topics for Further Study

Make a list of the things in your life that are most important to you, and then give them a value on a scale of 1-5, 5 being the highest and 1 the lowest. Next, categorize them. For example, you might use the categories of material and non-material things. What does this list tell you about your own value system?

Write a poem about a photograph from your childhood. What does the poem tell you that the photo does not, and vice versa?

Research the doctrine of non-attachment in Buddhism. How does it apply to Howe's poem?

Free write about some of your strongest memories from childhood. Next, talk to some of the people who were part of those childhood events, and ask them what, if anything, they remember about the same event. Write an essay exploring the differences between versions of the events.

Compare the idea of belonging in Howe's poem with the idea of belonging in Mark Strand's poem, "From a Litany." Discuss similarities in tone and meaning. Strand's poem can be found in his collection *Darker* and in his *Selected Poems*.

Many Western religions assume that human beings have a core or center that makes them who they are. Do you agree with this? Why or why not? Provide examples to support your position.

Interview at least six people, asking them when they are most aware of their bodies, and when they are most unaware of them. What do the answers have in common? How do they differ?

Sit in an upright position, with your legs folded in front of you, back unsupported. Concentrate on your breathing and try to eliminate all thoughts floating through your mind. Do this for ten minutes. Write down your responses to this exercise in a journal. Repeat this exercise twice a day for two weeks, tracking the changes in your attitude and thinking.

Write a poem to a friend or a lover, referring to incidents or events known only to the two of you. Now, rewrite the poem for an audience that knows neither of you. What did you change and why?

Compare and Contrast

1987: The World Health Organization reports that 8% of all pregnant Zairean women and 17% of Zairean blood donors are AIDS infected.

Today: A cumulative total of 12.1 million African children have lost either their mother or both parents to AIDS, according to UNAIDS (a United Nations' organization), and thus are regarded as "AIDS orphans." A recent report by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) puts the number of such orphans currently living in 26 African countries at 6.5 million, and projects that by 2010, there will be 15 million African AIDS orphans, including 2.7 million in Nigeria, 2.5 million in Ethiopia, and 1.8 million in South Africa.

1987: Prince William Arthur Philip Louis, first son of Prince Charles of Wales and Princess Diana, enrolls in Wetherby School in London, and is a pupil there until July 1990.

Today: Prince William has been accepted by the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, where he will study the history of art. He will begin his fouryear course in autumn 2001. He is first in line after Prince Charles to become King of England.

1987: The largest stock-market drop in Wall Street history occurs on "Black Monday"□ October 19, 1987□when the Dow Jones Industrial Average plunges 508.32 points, losing 22.6% of its total value.

Today: The great bull market of the 1980s and 1990s comes to an end, as technology stocks lead the markets lower. Analysts place much of the blame on the "bubble" (i.e., inflated prices) in internet stocks.

What Do I Read Next?

Stephen Batchelor's *Buddhism without Beliefs* (1997) provides an accessible introduction to the principles and values underlying Buddhism, without the accompanying religious dogma.

Howe's *The Good Thief* (1988) contains the poem "What Belongs to Us," along with thirtythree other poems. Readers could benefit from reading the entire book to develop a strong sense of how the poem fits into the collection.

Howe has edited, with Michael Klein, *In the Company of My Solitude: American Writing from the AIDS Pandemic*, published by Persea in 1995. Howe's brother, John, died of AIDS.

For an innovative look at 1980s' conservatism, read Michael X. Caprini's 1986 book entitled *Change in American Politics: The Coming of Age of the Generation of the 1960s*.

Matthew Rettenmund's 1996 book entitled *Totally Awesome 80s: A Lexicon of the Music, Videos, Movies, TV Shows, Stars, and Trends of That Decadent Decade*, is the first pop reference work on the 1980s.

Further Study

Howe, Marie, and Christopher Tilghman, eds., *Ploughshares Winter 1992-93: Voices from the Other Room*, Ploughshares Press, 1992.

Howe co-edited this special edition of the journal *Ploughshares*, which features new and emerging poets and fiction writers. This is a good book to read for an idea of Howe's taste in literature. Contributors include Michael Klein, Anne-Marie Levine, Fred Marchant, Jeffrey McDaniel, Jane Mead, Malena Morling, Suzanne Owens, Suzanne Paola, Candice Reffe, and Martha Rhodes.

Prince, Ruth E. C., "The Impermeable Line: An Interview with Marie Howe," in *Radcliffe Quarterly*, Summer 1998.

Howe talks about her writing history and habits and discusses her latest book, *What the Living Do*. This issue also contains a few poems by Howe.

Sewell, Marilyn, *Cries of the Spirit: A Celebration of Women's Spirituality*, Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

Sewell collects poetry by a variety of women, and from a woman's point of view, on topics including marriage, death, birth, and loss.

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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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